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A Critical Review of Wu's article :"Filling the pot or lighting the fire?" Cultural variations in conceptions of pedagogy."

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Introduction

This essay attempts to critically review the quality of reporting of Wu's article, "Filling the pot or lighting the fire?" We begin by reviewing the major four methodological approaches to educational research: the positivist, the interpretive, the critical and the postmodern. We find that Wu's study is largely within the framework of interpretive approach. The critique of this study reveals that the author needs to pay more careful attention to data selection and presentation so as to improve its data validity. In order to have a different perspective on the issue of pedagogic conception, a self reflection from a Hong Kong student is also provided in the later part of this essay.

An Overview of Major Methodologies Approaches

Research methodologies are generally grouped according to four main paradigms: positivism, interpretivism, the critical and postmodernism. Each paradigm has its own distinct way of approaching research with particular understandings of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Logical Positivism

The main research paradigm for the past several centuries has been that of logical positivism. The underlying beliefs about reality in positivism are: there is a reality "out there" in the world that exists irrespective of people (Bassey, 1990, p.40). To positivists, reality is objective, and people can accurately describe or explain this objective reality by conducting value-free research.

Usher(1996a) points out that what positivists believe about reality "lead to an approach to research that emphasizes determinacy, rationality, impersonality and prediction."(p.13). Researchers of this paradigm believe that if strict methodological protocol is followed, research will be free of subjective bias and objectivity will be achieved. As a result, true knowledge gained from data can be verified between independent observers.

Since positivists usually seek to express their understandings in the form of generalization, the data collected by positivists tends to be numerical and suitable for statistical analysis. Though there is no necessary association, it is generally true that positivism is likely to be associated with quantitative methods (Punch, 2009, p.18).

Although the positivist paradigm continued to influence educational research for a long time, it was criticized due to its lack of regard for the subjective states of individuals. It regards human behavior as passive, controlled and determined by the external environment. Usher(1996a) believes that:

> in making a knowledge claim it is not simply a matter of appealing to logical and universal rules because, since all knowledge claims involve justification, they all have a social dimensions. Claims are justified within contexts of collectively held conceptions about the world, and how to relate to it and know it. (p.14).

Hence, in positivism human beings are dehumanized without their intention, individualism and freedom taken into account in viewing and interpreting social reality.

The Interpretive Research Paradigm

In the beginning of the 1960s, the traditional dominance of positivism, or the quantitative methods as the way of doing empirical research in education, was challenged. That challenge accompanied a major growth of an influential although not dominant epistemology, which is usually referred to as "hermeneutic/interpretive".

According to Bassey(1990), the interpretive researcher cannot accept the idea of there being a reality "out there" which exists irrespective of people. Instead, reality is a construct of the human mind (p.41). While the positivists believe that reality is objective, the interpretivists think that reality is socially constructed and it is specific to the situation being investigated (O'Donoghue, 2007, p.16). The researchers therefore cannot separate themselves from the subjective world, and they construct the reality by self-understanding. Therefore, the researchers' values are inherent in all phases of the research process (Gray, 2004, p. 23).

According to O'Donoghue(2007), the interpretive paradigm is often associated with qualitative methods, such as interviewing and observation, which allow adequate open dialogue between the researcher and the subjective world. "Findings or knowledge claims are therefore created in this investigation process, and interpretations should be based on a particular moment and are open to re-interpretation and negotiation" (p.17). In this model, knowledge is concerned not with generalization, prediction and control but with interpretation, meaning and illumination (Usher, 1996a).

The Critical Theory Tradition

The view of critical theory tradition offers quite a different perspective to positivism and interpretivism. According to Gray(2004), this critical form of research is a meta-process of investigation, that questions currently held values and assumptions, and challenges conventional social structures. The major aim of critical theory is not to interpret the word, but to change it (p.23).

Researchers do this by challenging the guiding knowledge, usually referred to as "ideology", in our daily lives. Ideology seems to be naturally occurring but actually it is created and shaped by a system of belief which directs the policies and activities of the social world (Usher, 1996a). In other words, our perception of reality is colored by this accepted view of things that is historically rooted.

According to this theory, knowledge is linked with particular social interests, which is problematic and capable of systematic distortion (Donoghue, 2007, p.10). While positivism is concerned with prediction and control; hermeneutic science with enlightenment, understanding and communication; critical theory is concerned to unmask the dominant ideologies which maintain the status quo "by restricting the access of groups to the means of gaining knowledge" and by raising their "consciousness or awareness about the material conditions that oppress or restrict them" (Usher, 1996a, p.38)

Critical theoretical approaches tend to rely on dialogic methods that foster conversation and reflection, such as observing and interviewing. Critical theorists usually do this by beginning with an assumption about "what is good" (e.g. autonomy, democracy) and asking people in a social group, or organization to reflect on and question their current experience with regard to the values identified. Conversation and reflection allow the researcher and the participants to question the 'natural' state and challenge the mechanisms for order maintenance (Usher, 1996a, p.38).

Postmodern Approaches to Research

The fourth research paradigm is that of postmodernism. Postmodernism challenges modernity, and expresses the loss of certainty of what is known in the reality. Researchers working within this framework are sceptical about the idea of one true reality. They argue that instead of knowing everything in this world through science, one can only know something from a certain position.

Gray (2004) expresses postmodernism as being a concept that is used "interchangeably with deconstructionism and post-structuralism" (p.24).

According to Usher (1996a), in postmodernism we are not certain about what is known and the ways of knowing. Postmodernism challenges the powerful view that there is a determinate world which can be definitively known and explained (p.25). Any science trying to predict the unique and determinate outcomes from the reality is a "science of indeterminacy", since postmodernism believes that our reality is constructed and we can only sense it through a signifying system (Usher, 1996a, p.28-29). Hence, education phenomena, according to this view, are understood as indeterminate. Researchers cannot predict unique and determined outcomes through research activities.

According to Usher (1996b), to do research in a postmodern way is more than generating accurate textual representations. What postmodernists focus on is not the world which is constructed and investigated by research, but is the way in which that world is written about in the research text. To take a postmodern approach to research involves focusing on the text and asking certain questions about it.   This is an essentially reflexive task. (p. 31-32)

Synopsis and Classification of Wu's Study

Wu's research begins with reflecting on her own schooling experiences in Taiwan and in the UK. Schooling on both places was quite different and she believed the underlying reason is because of cultural variations of the conception of pedagogy. These variations might have a different ethos even within the country. The "microclimate", as she refers to, is something that is "very difficult to know or find out in advance"(Wu, 2002, p.390).

Then she conducted discussions by focus groups of international postgraduate students on their learning experiences in England.   They revealed that same learning experience with Wu, that the way of teaching and learning in the UK was difference from those in their home countries. She found that there was a paradox in what students demand and what they think they should be. On the one hand, the postgraduates felt that they should be more independent, while on the other hand, they complained that they were not given enough discipline. Wu tries to explain this by citing the work of Sapochnik, who views the paradox as the adolescent's need for a well-disciplined and safe pedagogic structure within which they can have room for their experiments in self-realization. (Wu, 2002, p.387-392)

It can be seen that Wu's research uses the interpretive approach and largely overlooks the other three. Based on the preceding analysis, two points can be derived from this.

Wu has used self reflection as a research method to construct the reality by self understanding. She, as a researcher, is the subject instead of the object of the entire research. These assumptions point her research straightly to the interpretive paradigm.

Wu called the data collected from the focus group discussions as "informal comments" (Wu, 2002, p.390).   As with most interpretive research do, the data she collected were verbal and it is not suitable to the quantitative statistical analysis used by positivists.

Strengths of the Research

In this section, we will see the contributions of Wu's research to the teaching practices in higher education institutions (HEIs).

It seems to be common that not enough attention is given to overseas postgraduates in HEIs in the UK. The awareness of conflicts and frustrations of overseas students that Wu has raised is important to all

stakeholders in HEIs, given that the number of overseas students in UK is growing every year(Lambert and Smith, 2009). This is especially true that Wu found her students in the focus group have experienced the same as those experienced by her, "their comments recapitulated my own earlier experiences and showed how little had changed in the last 10 years."; "at the same time, I remembered my own similar experience here. I had been there, felt that." (Wu, 2002, p.391-2)

Some qualitative researchers tend to be more modest and reluctant about making generalizations from their findings (Lincoln, 1985), but we can still judge these findings by using criteria such as credibility. While the research purpose of the interpretive researcher is to find a shared meaning of the phenomena with others (Bassey, 1990), there is a possibility that qualitative research findings can provide guidance to the other situation to readers (Uhrmacher, 1993). Given these perspectives, while Wu's research has clearly illustrated the feeling of frustrations as one of international postgraduate students under a "liberal pedagogue", readers can relate to her article and anticipate what may be found in their own situations. For example, for students, Wu's self reflection helps readers to gain a deeper understanding of the situation of higher education in the UK and offers them possibilities as to what may be the outcome if they are prepared to study overseas.

For HEI teachers, the notion of effective pedagogy for international students is relevant especially when they are facing the challenges of educational reforms and innovation. Wu's study illustrates the importance of examining cultural influences in understanding overseas Chinese learners: their needs and their expectations. It also provokes a possible new discussion for HEI supervisory teachers for developing the skills in supervising overseas students as well.

For other stakeholders, like school administrators, curriculum designers, the realization of "micro-climate" helps them to understand and response better to the conflicts of students coming from different cultures (Wu, 2002).

Evaluations

Thomas S. Kuhn popularized the notion that inquirers always work within the context of a paradigm(cited in Philips, D.C, 1989, p.67). From this perspective, the analysis of Wu's research can only made from within interpretative paradigm and we will will evaluate her work by discussing the research process and method she used.

Self Reflection as a research process

Self reflection is a research process that often being accused of carrying strong personal value but with low validity. However, we should note that value is an inescapable category in educational research (Carr,1995), and most of the criteria that focus on reliability, replicability and validity for evaluating

the methodological quality (Boaz and Ashby, 2003, p.7) are rooted in the quantitative tradition (Bryman, 1988).

Also, using self reflection as a research process is often considered to be an oversimplification of the situation.   This is because values of the resonance in the research vary between individuals and could be large for one individual, but small for someone else who finds the findings irrelevant to their work (Boaz and Ashby, 2003, p.12). According to Hargreaves (1993), micro-theories produced within interpretivism will frequently oversimplify, underestimate or ignore the complexity of the detailed operation of relevant factors in actual social setting (Hargreaves, 1993, cited in O'Donoghue, p.150).

Is Wu's study an oversimplification of the situation? With an aim to search for deep perspectives on teaching and learning in HEIs and for theoretical insights, another self reflection by a Hong Kong postgraduate student is also provided here.

No matter whether it is Mainland China, Taiwan or Hong Kong, the society is a culture of fierce competitive ambition in every field.   Everyone needs to work efficiently, people normally worked with goals and objectives, or I will call it "framework".   With framework we have clear criteria and standards and we can work successfully in the right direction.

With this perspective, I am not surprised when Wu mentioned in the article about her "English" experience.   Recalling the days when I was studying in the University of Hong Kong, I remember that I had the same experience with Wu. My teachers often seemed to be unaware of the date we were supposed to have meetings and the first thing I would ask would be, "what exactly does the teacher want?" if no instructions were given, I would feel puzzled and did not know what to do.

I see too many postgraduate students receive insufficient guidance –overseas, Chinese, as well as local. They are all the same.   I do not see culture as a factor to make this happen, because the teachers I mentioned above are all Chinese.   Rather, I think Wu has ignored fundamental human values. Supervisors are too busy writing papers for presentations and for publications and hence they do not treat the postgraduate student as a person with specific human needs, instead they are just names on a list which are bringing much needed income to the HEI.   This is implicit in Wu's paper because at the established "old" university, research is very important whilst her polytechnic university is more traditionally concerned with teaching.

Hong Kong students are not alike in the sense that not all teachers are alike.   What I have mentioned here about "human value" is just another generalization of the situation.   I am not trying to dismiss culture factor that Wu has described.   Instead, I believe cultural conception of pedagogy should be regarded as one of the factors influences either students or teachers' behavior in their studying or the

way they supervise their students.   If it is seen to be a major influencing one, more data is needed to support this perspective.

Yet, scholars tend to believe those western presuppositions concerning the impact of Confucianism on East Asian learning culture might be because the westerners do not fully understand the intricacies of this tradition. (Forland, 2004; Shi, 2004; Chan 2008) Being a Chinese teacher in Hong Kong for ten years, I think the current generation of East Asian learners is becoming increasingly similar to their Western peers, and traditional Confucian culture of learning is in a state of transition-- evolving into modern individualism (Shi, 2004).   Given that it is no longer a prerequisite for Chinese students to study Confucians nowadays, I believe the impact of Confucian traditions is not as large as imagined. Rather, the factor that influencing teachers' or students' behavior is the atmosphere of the society. For example, in the days when I was still a secondary school student, our classroom was a quiet one and no one will raise their hands to ask questions.   This was because we wanted learning "efficiently" and asking questions, especially irrelevant ones, were regarded as "time-wasting".

Quiet classroom is no longer a common feature in today's secondary schools.   Students love discussing and chatting.   I believe this is because studying is no long exam oriented as educational reforms nowadays emphasis on group work discussions and school-based work. "Framework", i.e. the criteria of studying, changes and our strategies to cope with it changes accordingly. This view, however, needs to support by further research.

<u>Focus group interviewing as a research method</u>

Wu concludes that a paradox was found during her discussions with students, that "students know postgraduates should be more independent, yet they demand more external structure" (Wu, 2002, p.391).

We should note that students giving more responsibilities to one party do not mean taking it away from the other correspondingly.   Spratt, Humphreys & Chan(2002) have carried out a research in a HEI in Hong Kong about the relationship between students' perceptions of their teachers and their own responsibilities in their studying.   Results show that the respondents have a notion of shared responsibility of their learning while maintaining a clear view of their teacher's responsibility and a less clear one of their own(p.251).   Students' perceptions about learning responsibilities are too complex to conclude by one or two sentences. Her conclusion on paradox of students' demands and expectations are probably too ungrounded, since it is difficult to derive her conclusion from the minimal data she collects from her interviews.

Possible Improvements and Conclusions

According to Feldman(2003), there are several ways to increase the validity of a research study.   To apply these to Wu's article, the following ways are suggested:

1. Providing clear and detailed description of data collection method, and how the findings have arisen from the data.

Wu has mentioned that two interviews were conducted with very low attendance.   The first one she said, "not many attended."(Wu, 2002, p.391) while the second one only comprised of three persons: one Greek and two Chinese.   She then jumped to conclusion by reminding the teachers to give the right degree of structuring to students. To add the validity of the research, some more knowledge or insight should be added to help readers to understand how Wu came to her conclusion, and to decide whether or not the findings apply to their own situations

2. Triangulation should be extended beyond multiple sources of data

The use of triangulations, or multiple methods, can help to balance out any of the potential weakness in each data collection method (Gray, 2004, p.33). Hence, it is suggested to have included more opinions from the stakeholders, such as teachers and school administrators, in Wu's research in order to provide different perspectives in the situation Wu addressed.   As Boaz and Ashby(2003) advocates, addressing the needs of key stakeholders is an important dimension of quality, though we should also note that time and financial resources are limited and therefore it is impracticable to include the opinions of all the stakeholders in the HEIs. Research using mixed methods need to be carefully planned in order to eliminate both sampling and non-sampling errors.

What's more the research acts as if there were no problem in the pedagogy of UK higher education; it is only a question of the right degree of structure given to international postgraduates.   Wu's study has a hidden value of cultural imperialism, in which international students are "allowed" to visit the UK, to learn from it and to adapt to it. The article did not hold up the whole higher education system in the UK for deep critical evaluation.   Neither has it asked whether the higher education in the UK that we are creating is the education world we want. According to Cadman (2000), there is a great temptation in the western academic world to characterize other academic traditions. To offer truly effective and intercultural education at its deepest level, we need to invest intellectually as well as financially, in creating contexts of reciprocal dialogue for international postgraduate education.

While Wu's focus is about "how to help overseas students adapt to the new education context", we need a curriculum to value two cultures equally.   The aim of future research is suggested to focus upon bringing cultural influences into the conscious awareness of all involved in the HE system, so that differing educational learning cultures can become integrated and the possibility of students feeling culturally adrift can be addressed.

No perfect pedagogy is found in the world even though cultural variation is not there in affecting students' perception on higher education.   Cross-cultural communication is important when cultural variation does exist.

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