



This Ain't Talk Therapy: Problematizing and Extending Anti-Oppressive Education

by Dan W. Butin

Kumashiro (2001) argues that the “posts” perspectives—poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism—are useful in furthering an anti-oppressive education in the core disciplines. This response elucidates some of the shortcomings of Kumashiro’s article, namely its misinterpretation of notions of oppression, rationality, and the individual within a “posts” perspective. A Foucauldian lens is employed to provide an alternative means by which to further a more constructive and less constrictive classroom environment. Specifically, this article suggests that a “posts” classroom must work under the construct of a “weak overcoming” that focuses on the structure of schooling and the organization of classroom practice.

Kevin Kumashiro (2001) has recently argued that the “posts” perspectives—poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism—offer a fruitful means by which to further anti-oppressive education in the core disciplines of social studies, English, mathematics, and science. He outlines how educators may begin to resist and dismantle the multiple and intertwined forms of oppression operative in contemporary schooling by employing “two main theoretical constructs from the ‘posts’ writings: unknowability, multiplicity, and looking beyond the known; and resistance, crisis, and resignifying the self” (p. 3).

Kumashiro shows that these constructs may be used across the educational system. Middle school and high school students can, for example, begin to reconceptualize American history (or any other core discipline) by focusing on alternative and often silenced voices. Student teachers can begin to rework their lesson plans to take into account the “unpredictable and uncontrollable things that always get in the way of knowing our students and achieving our objectives” (p. 10). And educators at all levels can emphasize the resignification and reinterpretation, rather than repetition and reinscription, of knowledge and identities.

Kumashiro provides a provocative, well argued, and potentially useful means by which educators may begin to enact an anti-oppressive pedagogy in their classrooms, be they in elementary school or in graduate school. I suggest, however, that Kumashiro’s vision of a “posts”-informed anti-oppressive education is limited. It remains beholden to a notion of anti-oppressive education as itself somehow outside of the potential for oppression. Anti-oppressive education is presumed to work through a rational discourse of overcoming, and the myth of the autonomous individual as an agent of self-transformation remains central. These

are all, from a “posts” perspective, dubious presumptions. My goal, though, is not to derail Kumashiro’s attempt to further the discussion and enactment of anti-oppressive education. Rather, this response employs a Foucauldian lens to elucidate where Kumashiro’s argument becomes problematic, and it provides an alternative means by which to move forward in enacting a “posts” classroom that is an enabling learning environment for all students.

Misinterpreting the “Posts”—Oppression, Rationality, and the Individual

Kumashiro argues that anti-oppressive education disrupts oppressive learning environments by questioning the finality and objectivity of the core disciplines. Educators, he suggests, should work towards fostering potentialities rather than repeating sameness: “[C]an we imagine an assignment where students are helped to resist repeating their and their teachers’ knowledges, identities, and practices, and to engage in the discomforting process of resignifying knowledges, identities, and practices?” (p. 9).

Yet how would such a pedagogy work? Should the student start to question why he or she is forced to go to school and resist by not showing up? Should the student resist the teacher’s (I presume) liberal/radical stance and begin to articulate “oppressive” perspectives? And what if the student already came into class with “oppressive” perspectives? Wouldn’t the student’s resistance to being disabused of such a stance be just as legitimate? Is Kumashiro *really* asking teachers to teach students to defy them? If so, how would the teacher begin to teach such a concept, since students would invariably question it? And if students didn’t question it, does this mean the teacher has failed to teach an anti-oppressive perspective?

The problem is that resistance has been conceptualized as something done only by those oppressed and oppression as something done only by educational practices antithetical to anti-oppressive education. While Kumashiro acknowledges that anti-oppressive education may be “emotionally upsetting” (p. 8) and that we may actually “desire teaching and learning in ways that affirm . . . the silencing of other possible worlds” (p. 5), there is no discussion of the possibility that anti-oppressive education may itself be a pedagogy of silencing which is resisted by those in disagreement. Foucault (1977, 1978) has shown that we should be skeptical of any discourse that purports to be outside of relations of power. In turn we must acknowledge that anti-oppressive education imposes itself upon students, from the texts to be read to the intellectual positions defended and attacked. The goal, therefore, is not a resistance of and escape from “oppression”; we are all constructed within and constructive of relations

of power. The goal is rather the productive use of such power relations, with “productive” understood as providing greater rather than fewer potentialities to remake oneself (Butin, 2001).

I find a second problem in Kumashiro’s implicit belief that anti-oppressive education can foster just such a refashioning of the self through direct, explicit, and rational discourse. This will-to-reflection is a pervasive theme in Kumashiro’s text in that “critical discussions . . . become central to the curriculum” in order that students learn to question normative knowledges and work through the “crisis” of their own “complicity with oppression” (p. 8). In much the way Habermas (1996) privileges “depth hermeneutics” in order to gain communicative clarity, Kumashiro privileges rational discourse as the means by which an anti-oppressive education may come to fruition. Students and teachers are urged to constantly “look beyond” and “overcome” their present positionality in order to “move beyond their preconceived notions of what it means to teach . . . [and] learn” (p. 9).

Through sheer force of will, such a perspective suggests, we can recreate our classrooms and ourselves. Yet to presume that we can simply change to become less oppressive is to presume that our “old” perspectives are just wrong and denies the contextual nature of how we come to believe what we do. McDermott and Gospodinoff (1979), for example, point out that “miscommunication” is no such thing:

[I]n the course of talking or moving in one way rather than another, children and teachers are doing politics. If this is so, we all not only suffer from communicative conflicts, we help to make them . . . because it is adaptive for us to do so given the constraints imposed on our behavior in the social order. (p. 178)

Furthermore, to presume that we simply can change to become less oppressive denies that changes in attitude and belief, even through reflexive self-

analysis, may not be as cathartic as Kumashiro hopes. Thus Rattansi (1999) notes that “the articulation of racist discourses and the performance of racist acts [is] seen as part of the ‘rational,’ that is, ‘reasoned’ activities of ‘normal’ subjects” (p. 104). It may be just as rational, in other words, to resist an anti-oppressive pedagogy as to be swayed by it.

Finally, Kumashiro’s articulation of anti-oppressive education is beholden to a notion of individual overcoming that is antithetical to a truly “posts” perspective. In fact, I suggest that it is here that Kumashiro unwittingly reinscribes the truly oppressive condition of American education: the myth of the radically autonomous and intentional agent (Butin, 2002; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). Just as students do not succeed or fail on their own, neither do teachers come to oppress or liberate on their own. A “posts” perspective suggests instead that who we are and what we do must be analyzed not as the acontextual resignification of the self but as the constraining, constructing, and individualization of the self within specific institutional structures and practices.

Let me be clear here. What is constraining is the frequent, public, and systematic assessment of the individual through the use of unidimensional and rankable grades. What is constraining is the departmentalization of knowledge into disciplines, of individuals into age-cohorts, and of time into 50-minute units. What is constraining is the belief that one means of being is oppressive while another is not. A truly anti-oppressive education should not entail an individual overcoming of oppressive tendencies by rationally talking about the problem to make it go away. I am reminded of Goldenberg’s (1992) analysis showing how the self-fulfilling prophecy—the “expectancy effect”—had more to do with what teachers actually did (or did not do) than with anything teachers expected of their students. Likewise, a truly anti-oppressive education that makes use of a “posts” perspective should be focused on the very ways we have constructed how we go about teaching and learning.

So What Would a “Posts” Education Look Like?

Let me begin with an example from my own teaching. Recently I conducted an experiential learning activity in my class in order to make vivid the problematics of norm-referenced classroom assessment. I wanted my students, soon to become teachers themselves, to delve into how the “worry about success and failure” (Varenne & McDermott, 1999) drives much of contemporary educational practice. After a lively debriefing, I had students write

up anonymous feedback on what they had learned. A small, though not insignificant, number wrote that they learned that competition could greatly enhance students’ motivation.

Norm-referenced assessment is a clear example of an oppressive classroom practice. It presumes that individuals can be ranked across a single continuum and that attributes are internal and stable. By its very nature it constructs “normalcy” and “deviance,” and in its application it consigns half the population to being “below average” and unsuccessful. A small number of my students, though, didn’t get it. They, in fact, seemed to have learned the exact opposite lesson from the one I had hoped.

Should I have been more direct and explicit? Should I have rejected their stance? Should I have just told them the “truth”? Within the language of anti-oppressive education this would have been an oppressive act to force my students simply to repeat the teacher’s knowledge and deny them their own alternative construction of the learning process. My point is that an anti-oppressive pedagogy does not admit the possibility that it too makes use of power in order to reject particular perspectives. I suggest that a “posts” perspective can. And in this admission lies a reformulation of teaching that provides an opportunity to fashion a less constrictive classroom practice.

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A “posts” perspective must work from the premise of a “weak overcoming.” Notions of oppression and resistance lose their centrality when it is made apparent that we are all constructed within and constructive of power relations, thus making the *reversal* of

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power relations the key issue rather than simply power relations, per se (Butin, 2001). Likewise, the notion of rational transformation loses its coherence when it is acknowledged that what we do is more dependent on contextual structures and practices than on acontextual internal beliefs. And the presumption of an autonomous agent falls away when the self is reconceptualized as something made visible within multiple social conditions.

A “posts” pedagogy thus makes use, as Kumashiro has cogently argued, of partiality, unknowability, resistance, and resignification. Yet this is not accomplished primarily through the curricular content but, rather, through the structure of the school and the organization of classroom practice. Graduation requirements of, for example, portfolios rather than seat time institutionalize the opportunity for the resignification and partiality of the self. Likewise, when classroom practices make use of project-based or service learning there is an inherent aspect of unknowability to what may be taught and learned.

This is not to dismiss the relevance of content knowledge so much as to shift the discussion away from the classroom didacticism implicit within Kumashiro’s perspective. Teacher-directed practices of overcoming oppression constrain anti-oppressive education to focus on rational discourse and intentional actors. A “posts”-infused pedagogy, on the other hand, extends the opportunity for students and teachers to refashion themselves by restructuring their environments.

To return to the example of my class, I suggest that I cannot, and should not, impose my perspective on my students. I can, however, construct as many situations as possible within which my students can begin to grasp the problematics of norm-referenced assessment (or any issue I deem fit for inclusion in my curriculum). I will make my students take IQ tests. I will construct tests where the criteria for success are arbitrary. I will construct other tests where the criteria are biased. I will require them to tutor youth who are having problems in elementary school. I will bring in my college’s admissions director to lecture on the statistics of getting into college. I will not give them grades on an assignment. I will give them too many grades on another assignment. I will have them debate the relative merits of ipsitive and criterion-referenced assessment. I will have them deconstruct my own assessment practices. I will have them reconstruct a suitable means by which I should grade their final projects. And, at every step in the process, they will dialogue among themselves and with me about these experiences.

At the end, some students may leave my class still beholden to the paradigm of normative assessment (or racism or cultural deficit or whatever). I hope that other classes, other situations, may further disabuse them of perspectives I deem objectionable. But this is irrelevant to my particular project. My project is to

construct situations within which students come to their own understanding of the issue in question. Their understanding may be in direct opposition to my own perspective. Their understanding may be labeled oppressive. But that is the price I pay for conducting a “posts” classroom.

Advocates of anti-oppressive education may balk at these suggestions. And well they should, for they offer only haphazard control over what the student will learn. But a pedagogy grounded on a “weak overcoming” is exactly one that embraces the partiality and unknowability of the teaching process. Constructing situations that force students to confront, resist, and resignify their identities and knowledges is what makes teaching an art form. One cannot know the end result, but I am not so sure that attempting to control it is a road better taken.

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