

Session 204: Discourse and Power

**Mentoring or Monitoring: A Qualitative Analysis of the Normalizing Discourses
Present in the Mentoring of New Teachers**

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Shoulds and Oughts

In an address at the University of Virginia, Jacques Derrida (2002) claimed speech in silence. And it must be that I find myself too long in the company of Derrida and Foucault, because I too wish to claim speech in silence.

I beg your pardon, but it will be impossible for me to speak to you this afternoon, even indirectly, about what it was that I was engaged to discuss. Very sincerely, I would have liked to be able to do so.

But, because I would rather not simply remain silent about what I should have spoken to you about, I will say a word about it in the form of an excuse. I will speak to you, then, a little about what I will not speak to you about and about what I would have wanted – because I ought – to have spoken about (p. 46).

Like Derrida, I will tell you then what I was going to speak about, but in my readings *of* Foucault, *with* Foucault, *about* Foucault, and in my attempt to write myself out of this abyss, I am learning what I ought to know, what I ought to speak, but of which I am incapable, at least today.

While it has been some time since I first read and listened to Laurel Richardson (1994) speak of writing as a method of inquiry, reference to this particular essay has presented itself to me several times in recent weeks, and I must invoke it once again. The

process of beginning to write, of beginning to analyze, has made painfully evident what I don't yet know, but pursue nonetheless. What started as an idea for a modest research project prompted by listening to a teacher describe her experience being "watched" as she was piloting a reading program for the school district in which she taught, has led me to begin to consider the ways in which we *watch* and *police* teacher behavior in schools, particularly as those policing practices are present in the mentoring of new teachers. I don't wish to dwell on the physical policing apparatuses of schools as extrapolated by many who read Foucault's (1979/1975) description of panopticism, but instead to examine how the practice of mentoring may function to police or even normalize teacher behavior.

Initially conceived, this project was to explore how the technologies of power as discussed by Foucault (Foucault 1976/1980, 1980, 1983) and the normalizing ordering of institutions function in the mentoring practices of new teachers. Further, to explore how educators unproblematically accept mentoring practices as good, without more closely examining their potential dangers. I could write a coherent essay about my initial findings that support the above, but if I did, I would be falling into the trap of concentrating the study on the "obvious 'repressive' effects of punishment" (Scheurich & McKenzie, in press, p. 16), and would thereby not contribute a layered understanding to a seemingly innocuous practice.

In an essay entitled "Care of the Self: The Subject and Freedom," Elizabeth St. Pierre (2004) asserts her belief that "if qualitative research projects are not in a state of emergency most of the time, researchers have probably stopped reading, thinking, and listening to their data" (p. 332). She continues by recommending that we leap "into the

abyss of discomfort and uncertainty that surely accompanies every study but is seldom described in the literature and working that confusion as vigorously as our imaginations [and I would add time] allow” (p. 332).

I fear that I am currently in this state of emergency, at the edge of the abyss, and so I will use this opportunity to write myself out of this fix, or at least to write myself to a vantage point on the edge of the precipice so as to carefully determine my next move.

The Study That Was

The study of which I speak grew out of my experience as a mentor and researcher working with both pre-service and in-service teachers. As I visited and listened to teachers in schools, some of them former students, they would discuss with me their experiences as new teachers being nurtured (or not), mentored (monitored), and observed (watched) by their assigned mentors. This prompted me to further examine the objectives and outcomes of mentoring programs in schools (see for example Scherer, 2003; Trubowitz, 2003), which was then followed by an examination of the ways in which mentoring programs may serve not only the purpose of development and growth, but also the purpose of policing, controlling, and normalizing teacher behavior (Caputo & Yount, 1993; Colley, 2003a, 2003b). This study also prompted a further exploration of the application of Foucault’s work in an analysis of the multiple discourses present in teacher education and how this framework provides a provocative examination of the social and institutional contexts in which mentoring takes place (Caputo & Yount, 1993; Lather, 2004; Schmelzer, 1993).

Initially, I sought to examine the various discourses present in schools as they relate to the purposes of mentoring, both stated and unstated. Michel Foucault’s

genealogical strategies (Scheurich & McKenzie, in press; Foucault 1975/1979) were conceived as the methodology to approach the question: What are the multiple discourses that inform the practice of mentoring in schools, and how do those discourses shape its implementation? As previously mentioned, I began to utilize Foucault's discussion regarding the genealogies of power (Foucault 1976/1980, 1980, 1983) to examine how the technology of power functions in the mentor/mentee relationship and how that power may be used in this relationship to control and normalize according to standards of "acceptable" (e.g., noncontroversial) teaching behavior.

But as previously mentioned, that is the study that was. What the above described methodology lacks is an exploration of the historical context for the establishing of the normalizing discourses present in the institution of mentoring and how mentoring functions as a construction of this history. It also lacks a consideration of the other "regimes of truth" that may be present in these discourses. Further, I do not wish to be counted among the examples of the "abuses of Foucault's work in education" as discussed by Scheurich & McKenzie (in press), and so I must begin, and begin again.

Re-Ordering

Helen Colley (2003a, 2003b) discusses the myth of mentoring and interrogates the celebratory status given to mentoring. In her text she states that "The last 20 years has witnessed a spectacular growth in the use of mentoring internationally across a range of contexts." In keeping with this growth, many school districts have instituted new teacher mentoring programs for the purpose of retaining promising young teachers, strengthening the skills of novice teachers, and responding to the ever growing demand for teacher accountability and self-regulation. Furthermore, these programs are often intended to

prepare teachers to pass performance-based assessments required for licensing, to provide pragmatic guidance for newly hired teachers, and, in some settings, to support or deny the granting of contract extensions beyond an initial probationary period. The fact that these supposed dyadic relationships between a mentor and mentee are “being opened up to the intrusion of institutional goals and agendas” (Colley, 2003a, p. 90) is particularly troubling.

I find myself caught in a web of trouble. As a teacher educator, and as one who mentors both preservice and inservice teachers, how do I function to further inscribe the normative institutional goals on the bodies of these new teachers? Based on Foucault’s discussion of an archeological method as demonstrated in *The Order of Things* or *Madness and Civilization*, I seek to explore how the episteme of accountability is constructed (see for example Colley, 2003b) and how an understanding of this ordering will help me use Foucault to explore the ways in which mentoring practices both produce and support “regimes of truth,” and that will allow a critique of mentoring practices, not for the purpose of eliminating mentoring practices, but for the purpose of recognizing the dangers so as to minimize their policing effects. What are the categories at work that are used to “classify” the performance of these teachers who are being mentored? As mentors, where do we stand in the production of these truths?

Beginning--Again

The impetus for this study is not intended to suggest that mentoring is undesirable or that its primary intent is to control and normalize according to some stated or unstated “ideal.” It does suggest, however, that if educators and policy makers unproblematically accept mentoring as “good,” they risk accepting, even endorsing, an

uncritical intrusion of policing, controlling, and normalizing of teacher behavior which may prove to lessen or even negate any positive potential. They may also risk a participation in the discourse of accountability which they claim to abhor. What are the possibilities and limitations present in our current “order” that will help us more critically examine our current practices and which will enable us to name how we perpetuate these practices?

By understanding the foundational assumptions present in the mentoring discourses and the originary discourses that give birth to current mentoring practice, might it be possible and desirable to trouble the way mentoring functions as a technology of power toward the end of presenting alternative strategies that are more in keeping with the intent of developing better teachers? Such an examination and the resulting awareness of the discourses of mentoring will challenge us, as educators, not to ignore these discourses by engaging in uncritically accepted mentoring practices that do not take seriously the mentor/mentee relationship and its “experienced” outcomes. This awareness becomes critically important when monitoring, observing, or “policing” (unintended or not), serves to further standardize or normalize teacher behavior, not toward the end of “producing” better teachers, but toward the end of “producing” a sameness of teaching practices.

What I have Learned Through the Practice of Writing

What I have learned through the practice of writing is that while my project is still in a state of emergency, it is not as dire and hopeless as previously thought. The current state is one that lacks completeness, but not one that lacks direction.

In speaking of the collection of essays and interviews titled *Negotiations*, Derrida

states that he did not choose the title *Negotiations* but that the word imposed itself on him. And in speaking of the etymology of the word negotiations in the context of his writing, he refers to negotiation as meaning “no leisure” or “unleisure.” Unleisure is according to Derrida “the impossibility of stopping, of settling in a position” (p. 12).

And so it is not that I lack direction, but that I lack leisure. And this lack of leisure propels me to explore the following questions as I consider an archeological exploration of the practice of mentoring new teachers:

1. How has the current emphasis on accountability in education contributed to current understandings and practices of mentoring new teachers?
2. What are the practices of mentoring and what outcomes do they produce in education?
3. What are the taxonomies or classification systems that make it possible to think and not think about mentoring practices?
4. What are the practices and classifications contained in the institution of mentoring that mentors and mentees may take for granted?
5. What are the unspoken (or unknowable) subtexts present in the discourse of mentoring?

As I begin again to pursue the work of unleisure, and as I probe the above questions, I will use my readings of Foucault, *with* Foucault, and *about* Foucault to view critically this practice of mentoring, especially in the context of working with new teachers. To do so means to explore the dangers present from a failure to consider mentoring as a potentially normative practice.

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