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Title: In Search of Subjectivity: A Reflection of a Teacher Educator in a Cross-Cultural Context

Cheu-jey Lee, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Educational Studies
College of Education and Public Policy
Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne
Neff Hall, Room 240B
2101 E. Coliseum Blvd.
Fort Wayne, IN 46805
United States of America
(260)481-5783
leecg@ipfw.edu

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Abstract

Instead of dismissing subjectivity as arbitrary and insignificant, this paper is concerned with an exploration of subjectivity and its implications for education. It begins with a discussion of the nature of subjectivity, including its impact on the decisions we make daily. It argues that acknowledging the existence of subjectivity allows us to investigate its enabling and disabling potential in relation to our practice. Also presented in this paper are examples of how my subjectivity has come to interact with my teaching and research as a nonnative-English-speaking teacher educator at a Midwestern university in the United States of America. My reflection is hoped to cast the problematic of subjectivity in a new light and to encourage readers to confront and examine their own subjectivity critically.

Introduction

Subjectivity seems to be something one wants to stay away from, especially in a scientific endeavor. It usually carries a negative connotation and detracts from one's credibility. In education, there are continued movements toward making educational practices objective or scientific. In the context of the United States of America, for example, the National Research Council Committee (2002) published a report, *Scientific Research in Education*, which attempted to respond to the ever-increasing enthusiasm and demand for "evidence-based" policy and practice in education. In literacy education, without exception, a plethora of resources have been put into the investigation of scientifically based instructional practices. The Report of the National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000) and the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008) are examples of the culminating products of such an effort.

As a teacher educator at a Midwestern university in the United States of America, I often hear pre-service and in-service teachers say, "I will not impose my personal opinions on students. I will provide facts only, and they need to think for themselves." It seems as if teachers are supposed to teach neutral facts or knowledge while their personal judgment should be avoided. This view on teaching is actually not uncommon and is linked to perennialism. According to Hutchins (1936), a strong advocate of perennialism, "[e]ducation implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. Truth is everywhere the same. Hence, education should be everywhere the same" (p. 66). Though perennialism was proposed many decades ago and, ever since, has been questioned and critiqued, still quite a few educators appear to harbor such a belief knowingly or unknowingly. The belief that teaching is a neutral act dies hard. It is also because of such a belief that subjectivity is regarded as a taboo in the field of education.

The dictionary definition (Webster's Online Dictionary) notes subjectivity as "judgment based on individual, personal impressions, feelings, and opinions rather than external facts." Subjectivity defined in this way appears to be something personal, counter-factual, and undesirable when we engage in a scientific endeavor. Yet the question is: can we expunge subjectivity or personal feelings, opinions, and even prejudices? For Gadamer, prejudices are actually an inevitable attribute of every human being. Specifically, he argues:

It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being. This is a provocative formulation, for I am using it to restore to its rightful place a positive concept of prejudice that was driven out of our linguistic usage by the French and the English Enlightenment. It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous,

so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that

prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole

ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply

conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says

something to us. This formulation certainly does not mean that we are enclosed within a

wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a

pass saying, "Nothing new will be said here." Instead we welcome just that guest who

promises something new to our curiosity. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 9)

Despite the traditional conception that there is a sharp distinction between knowledge, which is

considered objective, and prejudice, which is dismissed to be subjective, Gadamer puts forth a

provocative proposition that all knowing inevitably involves some prejudices. And prejudices, in

fact, constitute our existence. In this regard, Bernstein (1983) comments that the task for us is not

to remove all such prejudices, but to test them critically in the course of inquiry. Similarly,

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) argue, "Teaching is not a neutral form of social practice,

yet often it takes place with no attention given to how sociopolitical systems, power

relationships, and language are intertwined and inseparable from our teaching" (p. 383).

Therefore, instead of denying subjectivity outright, we need to admit to its existence in

our practice. Subjectivity is like "a garment that cannot be removed [and] is insistently present in

both the research and nonresearch aspects of our life" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Acknowledging its

existence allows us to encounter subjectivity in a positive way – we become mindful of its

enabling and disabling potential when engaging in teaching, research, or any other activities. In

this paper, I will present examples of how my subjectivity has come to interact with my teaching

and research as a teacher educator in education, in general, and in literacy education, in

particular. My confession is not intended to acquit myself of any guilt or responsibility simply because I have owned up. Instead, being aware of my subjectivity, I have learned to monitor and evaluate its impact on my practice. I also hope my reflection will serve to encourage readers to confront and examine their own subjectivity critically.

Subjectivity Uncovered

Subjectivity or, in Mead's (1962) terminology, the self is both an "I" and a "me." The "I" is the locus of pure subjectivity and agency, and the "me" is an objectified self understood from the perspective of others. The "I" seeks its identity and recognition from the "me." However, the "I" can never know itself through the "me" because the latter is always socially and culturally mediated and cannot be the pure subjectivity, i.e., the "I." Therefore, the search for subjectivity is an ongoing dialectic between the "I" and the "me." The "I" needs the "me" for knowing about itself, yet it cannot be fully understood and represented by the "me." In illustration, suppose you ask me who I am (an inquiry about my pure subjectivity, i.e., my "I"). I can tell you my name, which actually does not help much. I can also tell you I am a father. Though the term "father" reveals the fact that I have at least a child, it only provides basic information about how average people in our society view a "father." Still, the term "father," i.e., a "me" which is socially and culturally mediated and objectified by others, cannot fully represent my pure subjectivity, i.e., my "I."

Though the pure subjectivity or the "I" cannot be captured perfectly by the "me," the latter serves to approximate the former. In addition, through an ongoing dialectical process, more aspects of the pure subjectivity can be unveiled by the "me." Therefore, to describe my subjectivity as a literacy teacher educator, I will appropriate Mead's "me" as it can be socially and culturally represented in this paper through language. Specifically, through a critical

reflection on my practice, my subjectivity manifested in the following list is uncovered: (a) the education-first me; (b) the nonnative-English-speaking me; (c) the critical-literacy me; and (d) the religious me.

The Education-First Me

In the country (Taiwan) where I am originally from, education is set on a pedestal. In fact, this is also the case in several of its neighboring countries (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea, etc.). One is usually evaluated based on how much education he/she has received, and entering a prestigious university is considered a stepping stone to success. In addition, it is considered an honor to have a family member attend a top ranking university. Therefore, students in Taiwan are often financially supported by their parents in their academic pursuit typically up to the college level and, sometimes, even until they finish a graduate degree. Working part-time during college years is not necessary and actually not preferred as it may take away study time.

During my first few years of teaching, the education-first me was the rule of thumb whereby I used to tell which students cared about their education. I could identify myself more easily with so-called "traditional" college students who did nothing but study than with "nontraditional" students. Actually, I was quite surprised to learn in my first semester of teaching that approximately half of my students had part-time jobs. I thought that they should have put education first over other "distractions," including work, sports, and even marriage. For example, one of my students, Jessica (a pseudonym), had to work almost every day after school to pay for her education. She was a good student, never missing a class and always turning in assignments on time. Yet I strongly believed she could have done better if she could cut down or quit her work. What surprised me most was when I learned that both of her parents were teachers and paid nothing but apartment rent for her education.

Later on as I had more "nontraditional" students (e.g., some of them worked; others were mothers and had family responsibilities), I came to realize they were actually the majority of the student population at my university. Therefore, my education-first me was challenged and gradually compromised though it still consists of a part (a lesser part now, of course) of my subjectivity. I have also found, through years of teaching experience, that some of my top students are "nontraditional" students.

The Nonnative-English-Speaking Me

The nonnative-English-speaking me is present as soon as I utter my first word. My accent, along with my appearance, at once betrays the fact that I am not a native speaker of English. The nonnative-English-speaking me makes it hard for me to win students' trust, especially in the beginning of the semester, as I teach English language arts/literacy methods courses. Fortunately, I usually manage to get along well with them a few weeks into the semester.

The nonnative-English-speaking me serves as a double-edged sword in my teaching. On the one hand, I can relate to nonnative-English-speaking students as I have been one in the past. This semester, for example, I have an exchange student, Ping (a pseudonym), from China in my language arts/literacy methods course that requires a field experience at a local elementary school. During the field experience, students are not only expected to observe their cooperating teachers (the elementary school teachers they work with in the classrooms) but also to work with elementary school students. This is quite a challenge for Ping as she has to teach in English, her second language. During the first week of the field experience, I had a conversation with Ping's cooperating teacher in regard to how to help her succeed in her field experience. Fortunately, Ping has a very understanding and helpful teacher, and Ping seems to enjoy what she is doing.

On the other hand, I constantly remind myself not to let the nonnative-English-speaking me overshadow my rationality lest fairness is jeopardized. There is a fine line between being understanding of one or a few students with special needs and being fair to the other students. This is especially tricky when the student(s) for whom I provide additional support is from the same ethnic background as I am. Therefore, the nonnative-English-speaking me is a mixed blessing. Being constantly aware of it allows me to use it as an asset rather than a liability.

The Critical-Literacy Me

The critical-literacy me is probably the most prevalent and ingrained form of subjectivity I possess. It can be readily found both in my teaching and scholarly work. I regard myself as a strong advocate of critical literacy, which, simply put, is geared toward empowering students through literacy education to identify "social practices that keep dominant ways of understanding the world and unequal power relationships in place" (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008, p. 3). Critical literacy is not focused only on the instruction of literacy skills such as reading and writing, but also on how to use such skills to promote social justice (Van Sluys, 2005).

The critical-literacy me comes into play immediately the moment I choose textbooks for the courses I teach. The books have to be aligned with critical literacy, preferably written by people I know of or collaborate with. For years, I have used books written by my former university professor who also served on my dissertation committee. I have also compiled articles in line with critical literacy into course packs for my students to read and discuss in my classes. Of course, the assignments they have to complete are also tied to this critical slant in literacy education. Similarly, in research, the critical-literacy me permeates almost all the activities I engage in. It plays a role in determining whom I will work with on research projects, which

conferences I will attend, which journals I will submit my articles to, etc. It becomes a filter whereby options are evaluated and decisions are made.

The potential hazard of my critical-literacy me, as far as I can detect, is two-fold. For one, I may impose the critical literacy perspective as the only choice on my students while the spirit of critical literacy itself actually encourages considering multiple view points in inquiry (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). For another, I am so used to and comfortable with critical literacy as to become reluctant and even feel threatened to consider other frameworks in my teaching and research. This is especially dangerous in an era when interdisciplinary collaboration is inevitable.

The Religious Me

The religious me is the type of subjectivity I try to refrain from revealing in public. Yet it plays a dominant role in my daily activities, professional or otherwise. It even supersedes, though not always, other types of my subjectivity when there is a conflict between or among them. I am a Christian and hope to align my scholarship and practice with my religious belief. There are times when I am torn between my religious me and my sympathy for "unconventional" theories and movements in academia. For example, my critical-literacy me stands out in relief against my religious me when it comes to deal with queer theory, which is built both on feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and on gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities (e.g., see Jagose, 1996; Pinar, 1998; Sedgwick, 1985). On the one hand, my critical-literacy me tells me I should be open to new ideas or movements before examining them critically. On the other hand, my religious me reminds me to shy away from certain things before they take root. Similarly, I have been in the habit of reading philosophy books. One of my favorite philosophers is Michal

Foucault. He is a master in problematizing and deconstructing social and historical structures and institutions by revealing the discourses and power relations embedded in them (Foucault, 1965, 1970, 1979, 1980, 1987). I am thrilled by Foucault's keen sensitivity to, and critical analysis of, the systemic phenomena we have usually taken for granted. Yet I also feel a sense of discomfort in that, if Foucault is right, he has subjected all authorities, including my religious belief, to critique and deconstruction.

My religious me has not been an issue I am aware of or have to pay attention to in my teaching as the university at which I work is located in a Midwestern city in the United States of America. There are many churches in the city, and many people are either Christians or have heard about Christianity. I sometimes use stories from the Bible as examples in my teaching and assume most of my students understand and have no problem with them. This semester, I have a student, Mehmet (a pseudonym), with a Muslin background, in one of my classes. I am so excited to have him in my class because of lack of diversity in the teacher education program at my university. Sometimes, I have a couple of Hispanic or African American students, yet this is the first time I have a student whose parents are from Afghanistan. Mehmet is a brilliant student and usually has sharp comments on the issues we discuss in class. We actually "mingle" well. Yet if I allude unknowingly to the Bible, my religious me immediately reminds me of Mehmet and how he would feel about my comment. Mehmet's presence in my class makes me become more aware of what I am teaching as well as my subjectivity and identity.

Conclusion

The aforementioned four me's are not an inclusive list of my subjectivity. They are singled out for discussion as they stand out recurrently in my practice. There are certainly other types of subjectivity that are relatively implicit but may be as influential as the four me's I have

detected. It is not my intention to make a confession of my subjectivity, wash my hands of it, and claim to be objective and scientific. Instead, I want to make the problematic of subjectivity explicit and have a critical discourse on it. Peshkin (1988) says it well in reflecting on his subjectivity in research, "I do not thereby exorcise my subjectivity. I do, rather, enable myself to manage it – to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome – as I progress through collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data" (p. 20).

Similarly, I hope my reflection will serve as a prompt for more conversations on subjectivity which is usually passed up as if it were worthless of dialogue and investigation. Through a critical discourse on subjectivity, I believe we can escape the discomforting prejudices that subjectivity engenders while entertaining and taking advantage of a particular perspective its unique convictions provide.

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