

## **BETWEEN LEARNING AND UNLEARNING DIFFERENCE: USING CONCEPTS OF DIFFERENCE IN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE**

© Rosemarie ORTNER  
(Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Wien, Austria)

[r.ortner@akbild.ac.at](mailto:r.ortner@akbild.ac.at)

*The article examines two pedagogical situations, in which a specific notion of ethnical/cultural difference is performed by the pedagogue and refused by the client/student. The main assumption of this text is that in pedagogical situation we are constantly producing and reproducing certain notions of difference and their power effects. By applying theoretical tools from deconstructive and postcolonial theories and whiteness studies, this article tries to reflect on those power effects. Finally, it draws conclusions for a pedagogical scope of difference in practice as well as in theory.*

**Keywords:** Difference, Performativity, Postcolonial Theory, Anti-Racist Education, Whiteness Studies

By using the terms intercultural or multicultural education, it is often implicitly suggested that cultural or ethnical difference is something given, something we evidently have to deal with in pedagogical situations. Critical approaches to intercultural education, along with deconstructive Gender theory and postcolonial theories suggest that difference, respectively identity is by no means simply suppositional. It is the result of a complex process of discursive practices and power structures. Pedagogical settings are constantly producing and reproducing ethnical and cultural differences and the powerful effects of those.

In my article, I will follow this main line of argumentation by asking, in which ways and with what connotations 'difference' is discursively produced. What difficulties do these strategies contain and what consequences could arise out of them? Applying difference on individuals can become a reason for discrimination. Reflecting difference however, can become a resource for learning. As Spivak puts it, education has to use difference and turn it into a resource for learning, or even better, for unlearning (Spivak, 1995).

Therefore, I will present the reader two pedagogical situations, in which difference together with identity and subject positions are produced in a certain way. First, I will analyze a situation that leads to questions about identity politics and deconstructive strategies in pedagogical settings. The concepts of Performativity (Butler, 1991), Othering (Said, 1978) and Unlearning Colonial Knowledge (Spivak, 1995) will shed light on these issues. The analysis of the second situation will lead to questions of responsibility and its educational approach. For that matter I will use one approach that Whiteness Studies offer to understand this concrete pedagogical situation. Finally, the applied theoretical tools will lead to conclusions on pedagogical practice and theory.

## Situation 1: Moustafa, male, foreign

The first example is provided by the German expert in social pedagogy Melanie Plöber (2010). In the end of the 1980s a German youth center started to register all visitors. This list should provide an overview, whether or not the offered activities meet the interests and needs of different groups. In the 90s they added next to names also the respective gender. In the end of the 90s the register was extended by the category 'einheimisch' / 'ausländisch' (German for 'native or local' / 'foreign').

The following situation takes place at the entrance of the youth center: Moustafa, 16, son of a Moroccan immigrant enters the center and says hi to the staff member sitting at the desk. The pedagogue greets Moustafa and writes his name in the list while saying: „Moustafa... male, foreign.” Moustafa pulls out his German ID-Card, holds it out to the pedagogue and answers with a grin: „Wrong entry. I'm proud to be German” (Plöber, 2010:218).

In this example a category of difference that is used by the dominant discourse of inclusion/exclusion is applied in a pedagogical setting with the intention to provide appropriate support for a marginalized group. However, the addressed person rejects this category of difference. In what follows, I will apply some theoretical tools to analyze this situation.

### Performativity

Let me start with first reflecting Melanie Plöber's (2010) own analysis of the situation, where she refers to the concept of performativity. With the term 'performativity', using the theory of speech acts by John L. Austin, the US philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (1991) points out that language can at the same time produce what it describes. E.g. "I promise!" or "You are convicted" (said by the judge in court) are speech acts that by being said at the same time are also enforced. Thus they are *performative*.

By addressing Moustafa as 'foreign boy', as Plöber (2010) points out, two socially highly significant differences are re-established and *performed*: foreign / native and boy / girl. This is only possible, because speaking attaches to conventions, to social norms. They are activated at the same time. By activating these conventions repeatedly, they become sediment as they establish a norm. The expression "Moustafa, male, foreign' is effective, because it mobilizes a chain of repetitions which have become normative (e.g. about how foreign people look like, how German people look like, what male and female, German and foreign means).

Difference is usually seen as cause of an expression, as natural: Moustafa is different, therefore he is called foreign. For Butler (1991) however, difference is not the cause but the result of expression. Moustafa becomes foreign (in a socially effective way) by being addressed as such (see Plöber, 2010).

According to Butler (1991), individuals are given a social position as a subject in a normative matrix of signification through categories of difference. This matrix provides identity by excluding the 'Other' along binary categories of difference: male means not female, foreign means not native. In the same time as Moustafa is marked as 'foreign' in opposition to 'native', a no-go sphere is established, a sphere of the impossible, the non-intelligible, as Butler puts it. It is impossible to be both. Either a person is foreign or native (boy or girl). As long as you want to be recognized as a

subject you have to choose. If this decision is not possible, this person is outside the boundaries of the normative matrix. (That applies strongly to gender difference: there is no space between female and male and there is no acknowledgment as a subject without being identified as either female or male.)

Challenging boundaries is irritating, can be dangerous and will most likely lead to sanctions (symbolic disadvantages like invisibility, hate speech, violent acts). But it can also be a strategy to make the 'hidden' assumptions visible – and to alter norms or establish new, different, maybe less restrictive norms.

Plößer stresses that when Moustafa shows his German ID says 'I'm proud to be German', he claims a subject position in which he actually is not allowed. By doing so, he cuts right to the chase: Certain names, non-white skin colors or certain bodily features are the other of the 'German'. They can never become German. Eventually, he refuses to accept that norm. He makes it visible and challenges it by claiming a space 'in between' (see Plößer, 2010).

Unfortunately, Plößer does not report how successful Moustafa's intervention was and how the situation continued. Did the educator delete his entry? Did he write 'einheimisch' (native)? Or did he spontaneously establish a new, a third category, like '2<sup>nd</sup> generation' or 'neo-German'? Or did he reprehend Moustafa's claim and thus strengthen the subject position provided by the normative discourse? Did this sequence have any impact on other kids, was it an occasion for learning?

### Othering & Unlearning Privilege

In addition to Melanie Plößer's analysis (2010) that used the concept of Performativity to understand the interaction in the pedagogical situation above, I would like to apply another set of theoretical tools. Butler's analysis (1991) focuses on how the discourse produces subject positions along binary lines through performativity. In addition to that approach, postcolonial theories put the question of hierarchy in the center, the positioning of inferiority / superiority along binary lines. Therefore, responsibility becomes a key term.

In his book titled 'Orientalism' (1978) Edward Said develops his concept of 'Othering' to explain the logic of colonial power relations: By constructing the Other (the orient e.g.) and defining it and its human members as irrational, as not sovereign, as childlike and as needy for education and help, the European Self can be defined as rational, as sovereign and ultimately as superior. The construction of the Other plays a constitutional role for the Self. The specific other (a concrete group or person) is reduced to Otherness. We and the Others, Europe and the Rest (see also Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2005:29).

This discourse strategy of 'Othering' is unintentionally used in the youth center, by using a dominant category of 'Otherness', and not asking how this 'otherness' is constructed and what symbolic privileges the national 'we' and those marked as 'native' gain out of this construction. By applying the category 'foreign' to a person, who has lived probably all or at least most of his or her life in Germany, the 'native we' is constructed as a community of descent, having a right on privileges because of legitimate presence, while the other's presence is illegitimate or at least to be legitimized. The categories 'foreign' and 'native' structure any discourse on social and political participation, inclusion and exclusion. The privileges of those marked as 'native' lie in the assumption that their inclusion, their presence

and participation are given, and not to be discussed, while the position of the 'Other' is constantly under discussion.

Said's (1978) insight on how privileged subject positions are constructed through Othering can be used to analyze pedagogical interactions. However, Gayatri Spivak's works provide some constructive tools for education. For Spivak education is a dialectic process between learning and unlearning (Spivak 1995, cited in Castro Varela, 2007). And decolonizing education – she uses this term instead of postcolonial education – has to strengthen the aspect of *unlearning*. Apart from other things (Spivak, with her term of Unlearning, also addresses 'remunerated ignorance', a lack of knowledge, that is not only not sanctioned but rewarded, remunerated. That ignorance lies in the core of Eurocentric knowledge, that we of course find in schools and universities as content and practice – see Spivak, 1995), this means mainly *unlearning privileges*: Privilege is also a restriction, it cuts off the privileged from certain kinds of "other" knowledge. Recognizing these limitations and overcoming them is the aim – but not as a generous gesture of inclusion, but simply for the increase of knowledge. This can be done only by unlearning, critically working through one's beliefs, prejudices and assumptions. And of course by understanding, how they developed and how they work (see Kilburn, 1996).

In addition to the restricted knowledge, I would like to emphasize that privileged positions are also socially restricted. Overcoming these restrictions must also be included in the concept of unlearning privileges.

'Moustafa, male, foreign' on the first place forces the addressed person in a subject position, which is marginalized. Second, there is no reflection on who takes profit out of this 'Othering' process. And consequently, there cannot be any unlearning of privileges – neither for the pedagogues nor for other kids, marked as 'native'. Eventually, it is Moustafa's rejection that may trigger a process of unlearning for the educators: He offers his 'other knowledge', his knowledge of how discursive strategies function. This can only be effective, if the 'other knowledge' is taken seriously and a shifting of power structures in a teaching-learning relationship is possible.

The discussed situation raises a question that is highly crucial for pedagogical practice: How should we use and handle categories of difference, if we do not want to re-establish the underlying norms? How can we still address social inequality? „Acceptance of non-dominant positions and groups (...) always implies to accept and strengthen a symbolic order, which creates binary differentiation and assigned inequality” (Plöber, 2010:227). In practice this can be highly paradoxical.

## Situation 2: Acting on Racism

In the next chapter I will describe a situation that approaches ethnical/cultural difference from a completely different angle. This second example is taken from my seminar on “Immigration in Austria” at the German department at Eötvös Lorand University in Budapest/Hungary in 2009. There I used the method role-play to encourage students to act on racism, when they are confronted with it. First the students were asked to think of a situation, where they were in any form, maybe as observer, as bystander, involved in a racist incident. Later the group should choose one story and act it out. The aim is to find different options of how to act and react in such situations and to analyze their respective effects.

In this situation, the pedagogue (me as the teacher) chooses a different approach to ethnical/cultural difference, by trying to use it as a resource for

un-/learning. Using the term racism by referring to the students experiences I implicitly used cultural/ethnic difference as hierarchical social structure, in that we all take part. The exercise tried to explore the possibilities of responsible (re)actions, based on the insight that I, as a 'white' person, am involuntarily involved in a structure of injustice. But the first story that the group came up with did actually reject this perspective of racism as a social structure and also the perspective of responsibility.

This story – a story from hearsay – was about a 'white' couple, a woman and a man, in Népliget, a Park area in Budapest. The woman was attacked in a sexist way by two men described as 'cigány' (Hungarian for gypsy). After the incident a group of skinheads, who had observed the scene, offered to help by taking revenge on the 'fucking gypsies'. The couple rejected that support. In class I decided not to re-enact this scene and collected in my opinion more suitable ones.

In the student's story the racially marginalized are the *offenders*. The *victims* – as well as the person who told the story – belong to the dominant majority. Although they are 'victims', they even showed a grateful antiracist attitude by rejecting the offered rightwing racist 'help'. Thus, the racist attitude appears to be the result from the action or behavior of the racially marginalized group, indicating that there is a good reason for both the marginalization and the extremist racist ideology. However, it was considered to be a little too extreme and was therefore not shared as common sense in class. We can call this attitude the *inversion of guilt*. Also, in the Hungarian rightwing parties' rhetoric this *inversion of guilt* can be found frequently: Racism is a reaction to the behavior of the marginalized group; therefore their marginalization is either totally legitimate or even more an appropriate means to end their unsocial and inadequate behavior.

Furthermore, the story rejects responsibility of the dominant group. There are two groups fighting (roma and neo-Nazis), the narrator suggests, and I'm not involved actively, only as a victim of both – the 'gypsy' attack and the obtrusion of racist ideology. The own structural part in a discourse that is based on the distinction between 'white' Hungarian and 'non-white', 'gypsy' (read: 'non-Hungarian') Roma is invisible. The main difference is 'neo-Nazi' and 'Roma'. In that story, there is no space for thoughts about what (symbolic and social) privileges members of the dominant discourse gain from it. As long as you are not a neo-Nazi, you are not involved. Therefore, you neither have to feel guilty nor take responsibility.

As a side note, I want to point out the role of gender equality and sexism in racist and colonial discourses. Othering is often performed by marking the 'Other' as patriarchal and sexist – less developed and civilized. By doing so, the 'Self' is put in the position of enlightenment and gender equality, a position free of sexism. The story told in my class integrates into this discursive pattern, which can also be seen in Western European discussions about Islam and Islamic immigration (e.g. discussions on the ban on headscarves). It also has been highly criticized within the feminist movement and gender studies (e.g. Mohanty, 1988).

To address the topic of responsibility, Astrid Messerschmidt (2007) suggests applying insights of *Whiteness studies* to education, as they can offer various analysis of one's own part in racist structures. In the first place the concept of 'Whiteness' addresses the epistemic system by claiming that every person – also so called *white* ones – is assigned to a place in the racist power structures (see Pech, 2006). Usually 'Black' is marked as different and 'White' becomes invisible, as the center of the norm is not marked. The place from which the dominant majority looks is not visible. 'Black' is in the center even of critical discourses. The term 'Whiteness' however explores

the position and meaning of being marked as white. By changing the perspective, the dichotomy between black and white becomes visible as power structure. Being perceived as white means not being racialized at all, which is a symbolic privilege and assigns social privileges.

Confronting people with Whiteness – and that is what I did in my seminar by using the term racism and asking for personal experience – is a provocation and can result in resistance. Because Whiteness shows that I am part of the game, even if I consciously dissociate myself from colonialism and racism. Often, this leads to *feelings of guilt and rejection*.

Ingmar Pech suggests for pedagogy to differentiate between guilt and responsibility. „While guilt paralyzes or produces defense or repression, responsibility means to examine one’s situation, accept it and enable a critical reflection upon it” (Pech, 2006:85). In pedagogical situations that means for everybody to get involved in the problem personally, this is also true for the teacher or educator. While the reason for this involvement lies in the subject, in its self-perception and in its concept of social structures, it also can change power structures of interaction in the classroom or seminar, it alters the social relations, Messerschmidt argues (2007). The teacher as a ‘white’ person has to give up her/his superior position and make clear, that she/he is equally involved as everybody else. To improve my teaching concept this reflection on everybody’s part in power structures, including the teacher’s position, should be integrated on a prominent place.

In addition Astrid Messerschmidt (2007) suggests a more psychological approach to understand the difficulties in talking about racism in class. In post-National Socialist societies, Messerschmidt claims, there is a tendency to dismiss criticism, to understand it as unjustified accusation. Being the victim of accusations for deeds I have never done, or at least for which I was not fully responsible: That was and still is a common attitude towards the Holocaust and National Socialism still true for the third generation of the ‘Tätergesellschaft’, society of perpetrators. That applies to Germany and Austria, and as well it may apply to Hungary in a certain way, trying to come to terms with the history of different fascisms.

„The topic of ‘guilt’ is raised without concrete accusations for crimes committed two generations ago. There is an *introversion of guilt*, an imagined accusation that is applied to me unjustifiably” (Messerschmidt, 2007:60). This pattern applies to racism as well. The question of guilt – and the refusal of guilt – is put in the focus, while the concrete experience of racism is put aside. The mere mentioning of racist experiences triggers the question of guilt, without anybody being accused personally. Every mentioning of racist structures is perceived as personal accusation. Thus, to keep one’s perception of oneself positive, one has to reject the subject as a whole or at least one’s own part in it.

The student’s story as a reaction to me asking for experiences with racist situations can be interpreted as raising the guilt question and at the same time answering it: It’s not me (we), who is guilty. The topic of guilt conceals any question of responsibility.

Education should therefore try to enable participants to switch from feeling guilty (and rejection) to feeling responsible (and acceptance as well as action).

The concept of Whiteness teaches us, that also white people are restricted by racist structures as they are put in a place, which they cannot choose. A place that can be uncomfortable, because it restricts knowledge, it restricts relationships and it exposes one to not always justified feelings of guilt.

I probably failed in conveying that concept clearly to my students, at least before the role-play session. But I also suppose – and hope – that by acting,

the mechanisms of drama play might have had some impact, like raising empathy, feeling restrictions of a role and the power of humiliation as well as the liberating power of action.

## Conclusions

Pedagogical use of cultural/ethnic difference is highly difficult and often paradoxical. With the two situations analyzed above I tried to stress two different questions we face in pedagogical practice as well as theory.

The first one is: How will we be able to work with, in and against the dominant categories of difference and identity and how will we be able to handle the paradoxical demands between accepting and deconstructing difference.

The second question is: If we address ethnical/cultural differences as power structures that have to be examined consciously and if we see this as a pedagogical task, how may we conceptualize responsibility in case of being privileged – in theory as well as in pedagogical practice? How can we learn responsibility in that sense? The theoretical tools I presented can provide some answers to these questions:

1) On the one hand, by using categories of differences, we re/produce normative discourses and thereby force our clients into marginalized subject positions. But on the other hand an accepting approach to marginalized subject positions that aims at the redistribution of resources – here the access to pedagogical support – is necessary. As long as we are dealing with inequality along with symbolic differences, these two approaches to difference – accepting and deconstructing – oppose each other. Nevertheless, both are needed. Plöber (2010) draws the following conclusions for education from deconstructive theory:

- a) cautiously handle of differences: regard the perspectives of the affected subjects, let them speak and define themselves,
- b) be aware of differences inside groups,
- c) consider differences inside subjects ('multiple belonging', hybridism and border crossing) at any time (see Plöber, 2010).

2) We are directly responsible for the categories we use, but furthermore we are also responsible in a wider sense, that nobody is outside discourse and by being given a superior subject position we involuntarily gain privileges, even if we consciously dissociate ourselves from colonialism and racism. That is what the quoted postcolonial approaches teach us.

From that we can draw further conclusions for education – from a perspective of a privileged subject position, like mine:

- a) Critically analyze the motives behind any 'Othering': what does the self gain from it? E.g. what does me as educator gain from an 'Other' that is constructed as poor, patriarchally suppressed, migrant, female who needs help with integration? Is that construction helpful in addressing the needs of the concrete person, or is it rather what helps me to stabilize my white, Austrian, emancipated, professional self? To avoid the latter, let the addressed speak for them.
- b) Consider 'other knowledge' provided by marginalized subjects and use it as a resource for learning.
- c) Therefore it is necessary to allow shifts in power relations in teaching-learning settings. It is necessary that the teacher gives up his/her superior position and sees her-/himself as involved in power structures as well as the students.

- d) Make 'white' visible, explore the position of 'Whiteness' with all its privileges AND its restrictions in order to raise student's motivation to change the discourse of black/white.
- e) By doing so, pedagogy can focus on responsibility instead of guilt and enable students to act.

The used theoretical perspectives of deconstruction, postcolonial theory and Whiteness studies provide a shift of focus as well a profound critique of both social interactions and symbolic order of discourse on ethnical/cultural difference, which in my opinion can strengthen both pedagogical theory and practice in that field. They can help to turn difference from a resource of discrimination into a resource for un-/learning.

## References

- BUTLER, Judith (1991): *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt.
- CASTRO VARELA, Maria do Mar (2007): Verlernen und die Strategie des unsichtbaren Ausbesserns. *Bildung und Postcoloniale Kritik*. In: IG Bildende Kunst (eds): *Blickpunkt 3/2007*. Online: <http://www.igbildendekunst.at/bildpunkt/2007/widerstand-macht-wissen/varela.htm> [24.05.2010]
- CASTRO VARELA, Maria do Mar & DHAWAN, Nikita (2005): *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*. Transcript, Bielefeld.
- KILBURN, Michael (1996): *Glossary of keyterms is the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Online: <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Glossary.html> [28.06.2010]
- MESSERSCHMIDT, Astrid (2007): *Entnormalisierung und Vermeidung – vier Muste im Umgang mit Rassismus*. In: IDA - Informations- und Dokumentationszentrum für Antirassismusbearbeitung in NRW (eds): *Tagungsdokumentation des Fachgesprächs zu „Normalität und Alltäglichkeit des Rassismus“*, Online: [http://www.ekiba.de/download/Tagungsdoku\\_Alltagsrassismus.pdf](http://www.ekiba.de/download/Tagungsdoku_Alltagsrassismus.pdf) [20.05.2010]
- MOHANTY, Chandra Talpade (1988): Under western eyes. Feminist scholarship and colonial discourse. *Feminist Review*, 30, pp. 61-88.
- PECH, Ingmar (2006): *Whiteness – akademischer Hype und praxisbezogene Ratlosigkeit? Überlegungen für eine Anschlussfähigkeit antirassistischer Praxen*. In: Gabi Elverich & Annita Kalpaka & Karin Eindlmaier (eds): *Spurensicherung. Reflexion von Bildungsarbeit in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main, London, pp. 63-92.
- PLÖBER, Melanie (2010): *Differenz performativ gedacht. Dekonstruktive Perspektiven auf und für den Umgang mit Differenzen*. In: Fabian Kessl, Melanie Plöber (eds): *Differenzierung, Normalisierung, Andersheit. Soziale Arbeit als Arbeit mit den Anderen*. Vfs, Wiesbaden, pp. 218-232.
- SAID, Edward (1978): *Orientalism*. Pantheon, New York.
- SPIVAK, Gayatri C. (1995): *Teaching for the times*. In: Jan Nederveen Pieterse / Bhikhu Parek (eds): *The decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*. Zed, London, pp. 177-202.