

# After postmodernism in educational theory?

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Postmodernism was an anti-tank missile designed to cripple, not replace, the intellectual vehicle of modernism. It targeted modernism's logical and ethical premises: that the flourishing of scientific reason, and the expansive theoretical, economic and cultural activities that it drives, are inherently good because they represent the best possible unfolding of human potential. Postmodernism declared differing systems of values and morality to be incommensurable, and thus modernism's claim to logically, empirically and morally privileged paths of progress to be an act of colonisation. Its attack has removed modernism's shining armour, revealing the workings of power through governments, corporations and the media on our language, culture and values. While these processes have done much good as well as harm, modernism's moral and epistemic engine has been shown to be accumulation, not universal progress.

Postmodernism's guerrilla attack petered out into relativism, cynicism and nihilism in the face of resurgent neoliberal economics following the Cold War. Its enduring legacy was in recognising both the paradoxes and dilemmas of incommensurability, and the inherent value of difference. As neoliberalism now stutters in the wake of the global financial crisis, other theories are seeking to build with these tools an alternative vehicle for advancing societies.

Dialogic theory, which draws on the work of Socrates, Dewey, Bakhtin, Friere, Derrida, Buber, Noddings and others, offers a logic founded in difference, not identity: that meaning emerges from the gap that opens up when different perspectives meet (Wegerif 2007). This ontological turn away from a hidden structuring reality towards an emergent, immanent one is not relativistic, but *relational*. Truth is a function of engagement with the world rather than a representation of it. As such, Bakhtin maintains, it is possible for people to disagree and both be right: "because many standpoints exist, truth requires many incommensurable voices... [it] is established by addressivity, engagement and commitment in a particular context" (Robinson, 2011). As with Deweyan pragmatism, dialogic theory reinterprets knowledge and truth as never-ending processes, or chains, of interaction across difference. Its ethical imperative is to turn towards difference, whether in others or the environment, as a source of learning and growth rather than regard it a problem to be overcome or dismissed.

In many countries, education policy is now reverting to a traditionalism based in modernist precepts of canonical knowledge – and rejecting 'progressive' diversity as a threat to

commensurable standards. Dialogic theory and pedagogy offer a genuine third way: welcoming canonical thought as valuable voices, among diverse others, in what Oakeshott called “the conversation of Mankind” (1959, p.1). It promotes a cycle of creative deconstruction and reconstruction in the face of multiple threats to our survival and flourishing.

## References

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