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Constructing Discourses:

A Postmodern Interpretation of a Rural Public Library System

PhD

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Doctor of Philosophy at James Cook University.**

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Declaration on Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H1120).

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ABSTRACT

Aim

Most of the literature related to the study of library and information science tends to spring from a modern, positivist paradigm. Only a small number of theorists, working in what some describe as “the periphery” of library and information science (Trosow 2001), explore the ways that postmodern thought can be applied to the study of libraries. This thesis looks at issues related to a particular public library through both modern and postmodern perspectives. The insights evoked raise questions about many of the basic tenets of public librarianship.

Scope

The subject of this study is the Vancouver Island Regional Library, a large integrated public library system on the west coast of Canada. The researcher is also the Executive Director. The underlying conceptual framework includes the idea that modern and postmodern thought are reflective of different epistemologies and play out differently within the contemporary social condition.

The research is grounded in a qualitative, constructivist research tradition. Mailed questionnaires, individual interviews, and group interviews, using open-ended questions, are used to elicit opinions from board members, qualified librarians, local branch heads, and customers.

Comments that seem to indicate a modern or postmodern perspective about such things as truth, knowledge, belief, the knowing subject, language, binary pairs, the role of the author, the organization of knowledge, the increase in information, professionals, power, the panoptic principle, moral panics, significant groups, feminism, culture, premodern phenomena, work, and bureaucracy, as they relate to the Vancouver Island

Regional Library, are interpreted hermeneutically. This interpretation, it is argued, evokes new and interesting insights into the Regional Library that would not be found through scientific analysis.

A second cycle of hermeneutic interpretation evokes scepticism about many of the modern, positivist tenets of public librarianship that one participant suggests are “inculcated” into librarians. Questions are raised about such long-standing beliefs as the need for the librarian’s neutral stance; the necessity of the balanced collection; the public library’s role in supporting intellectual freedom; the intrinsic difference between fiction and non-fiction; the scientific nature of the Dewey Decimal Classification system; the superiority of professional librarians; the possibility of complete, correct reference transactions; the need to charge penalties to ensure materials are returned on time; the belief that the female nature of the workforce is not significant; the effectiveness of library bureaucracy; the need for increased tax support for public libraries; and traditional ways of planning for the future of public libraries. A number of pragmatic strategies are suggested.

Conclusion

The principal conclusion of the research is that postmodern thought can offer new insights into the Vancouver Island Regional Library. By implication it can help librarians and library and information science theorists understand other public libraries differently and, in so doing, assist public libraries adapt to the postmodern social condition.

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Before the Prologue

I am trying to write the first sentence in this Prologue. I can't get it right.

I want the first sentence to set the context for describing why I think library theorists and practitioners should consider postmodern social theory. I want to write it in such a way that readers will easily understand the insights I have gathered through reading and research.

But this approach seems too modernist. In postmodernism, after all, it is readers who decide how they will interpret texts. The author is dethroned. An author who tries to provide all the answers is “committing the modern error of engaging in a kind of terrorism designed to constrain or control your thoughts and actions” (Ritzer, 1997, p. 225).

I try again. Should I just write: “Dear reader, here are a few ideas. Make of them what you will.” What will a reader with limited understanding of postmodern theory make of that?

I decide to tell a story—the story of my journey to an understanding of how postmodern social theory is useful for public librarianship. Here it is.

PROLOGUE

1. Introduction

The question that this thesis addresses is: “Can a postmodern interpretation offer new insights into a rural integrated regional library at the beginning of the 21st century?”

Fundamental to this thesis is an awareness of postmodern thought. From my experience, most library practitioners have little interest in the subject. Six years ago, I was in the same position. However, through a combination of unexpected events, I have over the past six years come to a modest understanding of postmodernism.

The process has at times been difficult and perplexing. I believe this is because the process is not about learning about new ideas. It is about learning how to think differently. At least, looking back, that is how I experienced the process. In this Prologue, I will tell the story of how I became captivated by postmodern ideas and how I came to write this thesis.

2. The Masters Program and Positivism

My journey began, in the summer of 1997, when I enrolled in the Masters of Education program being offered jointly by James Cook University of Townsville, Australia and Malaspina University College of Nanaimo, British Columbia. I was a professional librarian with a Bachelor’s Degree in Library Science. I wanted to obtain a Masters Degree to improve my career opportunities. I was attracted to the James Cook/Malaspina program because it was a distance education program aimed at mid-career professionals whose work involved dealing with rural issues. I was also interested in learning more about research methodology.

The first course in the Masters Program was the study of rural issues. The instructor challenged the class to come up with a definition of the word *rural*. We agreed that a definition based on the size of a community or its distance from the nearest large community was not satisfactory because different countries use different numerical criteria. We also agreed that rural was not necessarily associated with agriculture because small remote logging, fishing and mining communities were clearly rural but had no farms. Nonetheless, some of us were sure that there must be a brief definition that would capture the essence of rural but none was obvious. Some of the readings for the course stated that many people have struggled unsuccessfully to define rural. Our instructor suggested that ruralness, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder.

Our instructor also pointed out that our desire to find one universally correct definition for the word rural was rooted in our positivist perspective. It seemed that, like most people in the Western World, we were positivists even though we didn't know what the word meant. He pointed out that positivism is a way of thinking that it is based on the following assumptions: There is a reality. People are distinct from this reality and can know about it. Reality is governed by immutable laws and mechanisms. People can discover the truth about these laws and mechanisms by rigorously following replicable scientific methods of inquiry. Quantifying an issue or situation gives a better understanding of it than simply describing it. Language allows us to accurately express the truths we have discovered (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109).

Because we believed that we could know and quantify reality and that we could use language to accurately express truth, we believed that we could discover that one precise definition for rural.

However, we were told, there are other ways of thinking. For example, in *postpositivism*, reality exists but we can only apprehend it imperfectly. In

constructivism, realities are apprehended in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions which are local and specific in nature and which can be altered as we become more informed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109). Many definitions were possible for the word rural and we were free to choose whatever meaning suited our purposes. I found this perplexing. I had always believed that defining terms was the first step in studying an issue. How could we study a phenomenon for which there was no correct definition? I wrote the required essays using my own definition and passed the course.

The research methods course was even more disconcerting. My work at the Vancouver Island Regional Library had included doing a number of market research projects to find out about such things as how satisfied people were with the service the library provided. In preparing to do this market research, I had learned how to create what I believed were neutral, non-leading questions. I had a basic knowledge of a statistical software package and was able to run and interpret frequencies and cross tabulations and discover statistically significant findings. I had expected that the Masters Program would give me the opportunity to enhance that knowledge by learning how to ensure my questions were truly unbiased and by giving me a better understanding of how to interpret statistical reports correctly. However, this was not the case. Although the instructors touched briefly on what they called *quantitative* research, the course was mainly focused on *qualitative* research methods.

The instructors encouraged us to examine the philosophical foundations behind research. We talked about truth and the different ways we think we arrive at truth. We learned that positivists believe that truth is discovered empirically through rigorous scientific research. Scientists have made countless important discoveries in the hard sciences using the positivist perspective. However positivism is not as effective in the social sciences. People do not follow immutable laws and mechanisms. In contrast,

postmodernists believe that truth, especially truth about human behaviour, is constructed in our discourse with each other. Postmodern truth is context specific and non-generalizable. I concluded that, like the word rural the meaning of the word *truth* was in the eye of the beholder.

The final part of the research methods course was writing our research proposal. I proposed doing a phenomenological study about the meaning that a library has for people living in a particular Vancouver Island rural community. I chose phenomenological research as my methodology because I had learned that phenomenology was the way to study meaning. My proposal was accepted. I then set about reading appropriate books and articles on the phenomenological research tradition (Carson, 1986; Creswell, 1998, Embree, 1997, Moustakas, 1994; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990; Van Manen, 1996; Van Manen, 1997; Weber, 1986). None of what I read made much sense to me.

Fortunately, my next step was to review the literature related to my question. Research would come later. I spent a year reading everything I could find about what people think are the roles and purposes of public libraries. Towards the end of reviewing this literature, I came across a small number of writers (Black & Muddiman, 1997; G. P. Radford, 1998) who suggested that an understanding of postmodern thought could provide useful insights into understanding libraries.

3. The Doctoral Program and Postmodernism

I decided to change my research question to something to do with an exploration of the ways in which postmodern thought can help us to understand public libraries. Since the topic of my research now required more study than would have been required by a Masters Degree, I was permitted to upgrade to a Doctor of Philosophy without completing the Masters Program. I no longer proposed to use the phenomenological

research tradition, which still eluded me, choosing instead constructivist, hermeneutical methods which I had begun to understand. With phenomenology behind me, I set about reading about postmodernism. The first book I read was by George Ritzer (1997). Ritzer commented,

Postmodern social theory is a highly complex, jargonistic, contradictory body of work that would put off all but the most persistent social thinkers. This book is designed for those who really would like to know what the noise surrounding postmodernism is all about but lack the training and/or time to pore over the innumerable original texts. (p. 5)

I read on:

Judith Butler (1995:51) speaks not only for many postmodernists but also most modernists when she announces: “I don’t know what postmodernism is.” While no concept has greater resonance today among scholars than “postmodernism,” there is an enormous ambiguity and controversy over exactly what is meant by that notion and related terms. (p. 5)

This time I was not surprised that the definition was unclear. I had become used to the idea that people see things differently. I had thought enough about positivism over the intervening years that I had ceased to be an “unwitting positivist.” My view of reality was almost always grounded in the positivist assumptions mentioned above, but I was conscious of this and it was no longer difficult to step away from those assumptions and accept that there were other ways of thinking. I was in the right frame of mind to learn about postmodernism and, despite his warnings, I found Ritzer’s *Postmodern Social Theory* (1997) to be one of the most fascinating books I had ever read.

I continued to read and think about postmodernism (Dickens & Fontana, 1994; McRobbie, 1994; Rosenau, 1992; Seidman, 1994a; Seidman, 1994b; Seidman, 1998; Smart, 1992; Smart, 1993). My Malaspina and James Cook advisors encouraged and supported me in this pursuit. I gradually came to believe that postmodernism is a reaction to the positivist thinking of the modern age.

Some of the postmodern theorists I read suggested that the modern age began during the Renaissance when Francis Bacon (1561-1626) introduced the idea that humans could exercise power over nature by discovering nature's secrets. Others suggested it began in the Age of Enlightenment when Descartes (1596-1650), Locke (1632-1704), Hume (1711-1776), and Kant (1724-1804) explored the nature of reason, experience and subjectivity, and when the premodern idea that truth was revealed by God gave way to the positivist view that truth could be discovered empirically (Hall, Held & McGrew, 1994; Sedgwick, 2001, Seidman, 1998). Regardless of when the modern age began, during the 20th century, various thinkers began to seriously question the modern mind-set. Writers such as Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Anthony Giddens, Jurgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman, Daniel Bell and Fredric Jameson raised people's awareness that modernism has a dark side. They wrote about such things as relationships of power, the consumer society, the death of grand theories, modernity as a juggernaut, modernity as an unfinished project, living with ambivalence, the change in the character of knowledge, and the depthlessness of postmodern society. There had been other criticisms of modernism in the past, but this outpouring of concern with the underlying beliefs of modernism was seen to be a new movement known as postmodernism.

I went back to library literature to see if I could locate work by library theorists related to postmodernism. Among the numerous things written about libraries over the past two decades, I found a handful of articles and books that addressed the issue of how postmodern ideas could be applied to libraries (Budd, 1995; Budd, 2001a; Budd, 2001b, Budd & Raber, 1998; Cornelius, 1996; Dick, 1995; Dick, 1999; Muddiman, 1999; G. P. Radford, 1998; G. P. Radford & Budd, 1997; Richardson, 1992; Trosow, 2001; Wisner, 2000). I was excited to find that some of these writers' ideas were

consistent with the ideas I was exploring. I was disappointed that, in relation to the work of non-library postmodern theorists, other ideas seemed confused and confusing. I noted that all the writers focused on academic libraries or the teaching of librarianship and information studies. None had much to say about public libraries.

I realized that I had arrived in a unique position. During the years I was working in the Masters Program I had been appointed the Executive Director of the Vancouver Island Regional Library. As a fulltime public library administrator, I knew about the myriad details that small and large public libraries deal with every day. As a fulltime PhD student, in a non-library related PhD program, I had been exposed to ideas that most librarians have not had the opportunity to learn about. Although I realized that my understanding of postmodernism was fairly basic, I felt I knew as much as the library theorists who were writing about it in the literature. I proceeded to do my research with stakeholders in the Vancouver Island Regional Library and thus this thesis emerged.

After the Prologue

Dear reader, here are a few ideas. Make of them what you will.

Before Chapter One.

I wrote the first draft of chapter one. It was tightly organized. It followed the thesis structure we were taught in the Masters Program. It spoke with authority and confidence. It was clear and concise and to the point.

My advisors agreed that it is all those things. BUT—they also said it was “archetypally modern” and thus inconsistent with my new found position as a moderate postmodernist. There was no room in my archetypally modern chapter for readers to make their own interpretations.

I tried a second draft. This one was loosely organized and discontinuous. It evoked a sense of ambiguity and inconclusiveness. It was almost as if the sentences had little spaces in them for other ideas to wriggle free. Postmodern readers would probably get it, but I think it would just annoy modern readers.

I tried a third draft – somewhere between the other two. I think it is organized enough for modern readers but contingent enough for postmodern readers. It guides the reader through the story but allows readers to disagree with me.

I hope my ideas survive this ordeal by language.