

2014

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Recommended Citation

Fortney, James, "Postcolonial Critique: A Threshold Concept in Organizational Communication Studies" (2014). *Backward by Design Mini-Studies*. 1.

https://cedar.wwu.edu/wis_backwardsbydesign/1

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Postcolonial Critique

A Threshold Concept in Organizational Communication Studies

James Fortney

In 2014, I attended the Backwards By Design professional development retreat as a way to enhance my writing instruction in the field of communication studies. The retreat workshops provided an opportunity for me to create and transform one of my courses by envisioning where I wanted to end up and working backwards on how to get there. By giving attention to design, enactment, and result, I was able to re-consider the overall learning goals of the course, with particular attention to the core concepts that potentially hold the power to transform student perception of communication studies. Below, I provide a description of the specific course I selected to workshop during the retreat, the threshold concept (Cousin, 2006) I chose to guide my re-design of the course, and the implications (i.e., assessment, impact) of the concept for my students' writing both during and following the implementation of the new course design.

My teaching considers the relationship between communication and organizing. In particular, I am interested in how we come to know work individually, relationally, organizationally, and culturally through the communication of difference. Currently, I teach a 400-level writing proficiency seminar titled, "Organizational Communication." My course design represents a sustained effort to do justice to the complexities and contradictions that characterize difference as a defining feature of organizational life (Ashcraft, 2011). As such, my students and I strive to understand how varying dimensions of social identity articulate with one another, with a focus on the consequences of those articulations for organizing practices and processes (Mumby, 2011). Unfortunately, current undergraduate textbooks (and most contemporary scholarship) fail to adequately address global perspectives on this topic (e.g., Shome & Hegde, 2006). The privileging of a Euro-American intellectual tradition reifies and legitimates a particular form of rationality, leading to further colonization, subordination, and oppression of native/indigenous/other forms of understanding and organizing (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2013). In the redesign of this course, I worked to develop strategies for recovering alternative rationalities, worldviews, and voices on the process of communicating and organizing. In this way, the "postcolonial critique" (e.g., Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007) of organizational communication studies emerges as a threshold concept because of its power to shift both the ontological and conceptual dimensions of student perspectives in this scholarly vein (Cousin, 2006).

As Young (2003) points out, postcolonialism offers different ways of understanding the world, an understanding based on “insurgent knowledges that come from the subaltern, the dispossessed, and seek to change the terms and values under which we all live” (p. 20). I chose this threshold concept because it is central to the mastery of contemporary organizational communication theory and research.

My primary goal when teaching “Organizational Communication” is to invite students to reverse their intuitive understandings of normative, taken-for-granted forms of communicating and organizing. In this way, I push students into discursive spaces that are uncomfortable, often requiring ongoing emotional (and ontological) repositioning (Cousin, 2006). The postcolonial critique beautifully facilitates this important course goal. During the first week, we spend one class session in dialogue (via Skype) with Dr. Kirsten Broadfoot, an Associate Professor at University of Colorado Denver. A native of New Zealand, Broadfoot is an iconoclastic figure in the field of organizational communication because of her efforts to advance theories of postcolonialism in our teaching and scholarship. Prior to the dialogue, I have students read her influential article on postcolonial organization theory (e.g., Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007). Students are encouraged to question Broadfoot, but she in turn questions them as a way to ‘plant the seeds’ of integrative, irreversible knowledge (Cousin, 2006). Following the dialogue, I encourage my students to remember Broadfoot’s voice (i.e., the threshold concept itself) in their reading of traditional course texts, during seminar discussion, and throughout the production of individual writing. For the purposes of this study, I read within and across individual writing, listening for the diverse voices postcolonial theorists so willfully desire to hear.

My sample consisted of 22 research proposals, each using qualitative methods (e.g., ethnography). The proposals covered an impressive array of topics in organizational communication studies (e.g., (1) professional identities; (2) knowledge-intensive organizations; (3) work-home relationships; (4) the body, sexuality, and emotion; and (5) employee resistance). Consistent among proposals were commitments to conceiving of organizations as dynamic sites of control and resistance. In my reading of each proposal, I listened for the voice of postcolonial theory (e.g., alternately, nascent, fledgling, ongoing, stalled, terminal, and overlooked, etc.). My guiding question for reading each proposal was: How do we recover alternative rationalities, worldviews, and voices on the processes of organizing in diverse contexts? (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007). Students we encouraged to consider this question throughout the development of their final proposals.

In many ways, the use of this threshold concept had a powerful impact on the genre and quality of written work produced by my students. In reading their proposals, I recognized the postcolonial critique 'at work' in at least three common forms. First, several students used postcolonial theory as an *add-on* to the review of literature section. This approach illustrates a somewhat superficial understanding of the concept and its transformative potential. Nonetheless, these students found meaningful ways to include the concept in their research proposals. Second, some students *infused* postcolonial theory into the review of literature section as well as the section on research methods. This approach illustrates a deeper understanding of the concept and its transformative potential. These proposals drew attention to relevant postcolonial literature in organization studies and considered ways to include diverse voices in the study (e.g., participant criteria, interview styles, and recruitment strategies). And third, a few students used postcolonial theory in ways that *transformed* their proposals into postcolonial studies themselves. This approach illustrates the transformative power of threshold concepts. These proposals demonstrated an ontological as well as a conceptual shift (Cousin, 2006), challenging the field of organization studies to recover diverse voices and alternative rationalities. These students even invoked alternative forms of writing (e.g., voice) that disrupted more traditional social scientific research designs. Each of these forms (i.e., add-on, infusion, transformation) has a relationship to the postcolonial critique of organization studies and show varying levels of engagement with the question of organizing in diverse contexts.

As Cousin (2006) reminds us, "mastery of a threshold concept often involves messy journeys back, forth and across conceptual terrain" (p. 5). This process is certainly true for students, but it is equally relevant for teachers. My own capacity for growth and understanding of organizing in diverse contexts remains vast. By incorporating the postcolonial critique into my "Organizational Communication" writing proficiency seminar, I found myself in an unstable space *alongside* and *with* my students. I will continue to use this threshold concept in the future because of its ability to produce assignments, activities, and discussions that are continually attuned to the demands of Otherness. These, in turn, produce a form of postcolonial reflexivity (Shome, 1996) for students that better prepares them for communicating and organizing globally.

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