Case Report

Cultural study; A new approach to educational studies

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Abstract

In this article, the present researchers try to study cultural study approach in understanding educational phenomena. At the first step, we discuss the important backgrounds of this trend, and at the second step, the methodological factors of this trend are investigated. In this article, two research paradigms in educational study (positive approach and cultural study) are compared. Of course, aside from these two paradigms, we can draw the third paradigm which studies educational phenomena with hermeneutic trend. Our purpose is to draw and determine cultural study status among the above-mentioned paradigms for studying educational phenomena.

Keywords: cultural Study, Educational Science, Neo-Marxism, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Educational science, which tried to apply empirical science methodology in humanities and educational study, has been influenced by post-positivism in the twenty first century. Positivist educational study sought to achieve objective and universal findings which its purpose is to explain, prognosticate and control educational phenomena. Positivists believed that educational phenomena are also facts which are free value. Therefore, educational facts are independent from identifying subject, and the mind of identifying subject plays the role of the reflecting mirror. Positivist educational study was under the influence of a sort of naive realism which assumed facts as objective and away from human beings' mind. From the middle of twentieth century, positivist educational study has been frequently criticized by a bulk of approaches. Some of its important critics are: Karl Popper's Falsificationism, Neopragmatism under the leadership of Quine and Rorty, critical realism, Feyerabend and Kuhn's relativism, Gadamer and Heidegger’s hermeneutics, and also Neo-Marxist trends of Frankfort school such as Habermas.

Among them, Frankfort school thinkers are one of the most important approaches providing educational study with a great revolution. Among positivist objectivism, Heidegger’s subjectivism and Kuhn’s paradigm, Frankfort school thinkers put the third approach into educational study. Jürgen Habermas (1971) divided scientific interests into three branches: analytical-empirical science, historical-hermeneutic science and critical science. Frankfort school’s critical theory put an emphasis upon culture as one of the major bases of domination and changed it into one of the major pillars of educational study. Since the 1960’s, English Birmingham school members such as Stuart Hall and Grossberg along with people like Raymond Williams (influenced by Gramsci’s thoughts) opened a new branch into Neo-Marxist thoughts through which, on the one hand, they went far away from classic Marxist dogmatism and even from some newer Marxist thoughts (such as reproduction and resistance theories), on the other hand, even though they were under the influence of postmodernism, they also criticized some of its dimensions and built up a new...
trend of cultural study.

In this article, the present researchers are going to study cultural study approach in education and its ratio with objectivist paradigms (like positivism) and relativist ones (such as some postmodernist trends). At the first stage, one should know that from which backgrounds cultural science roots and what is the defaults in educational study, and, at the second stage, the distinguished characteristics of cultural study approach (as one of qualitative research traditions) will be discussed. In cultural study, our emphasis is on the more recent thinkers, such as Henry Giroux, who has made some reforms in cultural study, and his theories in cultural study such as Border Pedagogy and Voice Pedagogy have been warmly welcomed.

Cultural study

About the definition of cultural study, we are encountered with a great number of interpretations which have fundamental conflicts with each other. Turner (2003) believes that cultural study is not a new discipline or a set of academic disciplines, but it is an interdisciplinary branch in which there are specific methods and concerns for convergence, so that they can answer to questions and challenges which are not answerable among specific disciplines. Barker (2008), in the method of Wittenstein, claims cultural study as a language game consisting of theoretical interpretations and activities which have been applying and expanding by the people who their works of art called cultural study. Therefore, comparing with other disciplines, cultural study cannot be defined, but it utilizes some purposes and methods that differentiate it from specific disciplines like physics. In this assumption, cultural study is a discourse or it is a mass of ideas that disseminates a special kind of critical research in educational phenomena, and any kind of cultural study cannot be named as cultural study.

Bal (2003) believes that cultural study has not been successful in transforming methodological realm, but in cultural study “the object- what you study –has changed, the method- how you do it-has not” (Bal, 2003). According to Bal, cultural study has challenged the manner of looking at the issues and educational phenomena in classical educational study , and creates a new attitude to educational phenomena and it seeks to appreciate the relationship between culture and power in social problems such as racial, ethnic, gender injustice. Following Hall, Barker believes that: “Cultural study is a discursive formation, that is, ‘a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society’... Cultural study is constituted by a regulated way of speaking about objects (which it brings into view) and coheres around key concepts, ideas and concerns. Further, cultural study had a moment at which it named itself, even though that naming marks only a cut or snapshot of an ever-evolving intellectual project” (Barker, 2008).

Discussing about the roots of cultural study, Hal believes that: "cultural study is a discursive formation, in Foucault sense. It has no simple origin..." (Hall 1996). He assumes that cultural study is widely influenced by Marxism, and its recent Left trends. In Hal’s view, cultural study does not comprehensively overlap Marxism, and the emergence of cultural study is not followed by Marxism. The factors approximating Marxism and cultural study were some common issues such as injustice problems, the manner of objection to cultural repression and the like. These common issues and problems linked Marxism and cultural study (more in Hegelian context).

The considered concept of cultural study in this article has been blended with Frankfort school of critical theory and the recent theories of thinkers entitled as critical pedagogy. Giroux, as one of the lecturers of cultural study in classical critical pedagogy, following Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and other English thinkers of cultural study, believes that “the purpose of cultural study is the appreciation of how culture is involved in expanding political power by exploiting organizations and numerous social institutes, and also by the process of production, consumption and distribution. Thus, cultural study has a critical attitude and tries to digest the complicated relations among institutions and cultural symbols, and power in creating social-political factors” (Giroux, 2004). This consideration of cultural study has a synthesis with politics and power. In this view culture is defined as following: “Culture is partly defined as a circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulated, identities are constructed, inhabited, and discarded, agency is manifested in both individualized and social forms, and discourses are created, which make culture itself the object of inquiry and critical analyses. Rather than being viewed as a static force, the substance of culture and everyday life—knowledge, goods, social practices, and contexts—repeatedly mutates and is subject to ongoing changes and interpretations” (ibid: 59-60).

Most thinkers believe that cultural study, by this consideration, started in the 1960’s by the members’ activity of the Center for Contemporary Cultural study in Birmingham along with the people like Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams (Turner, 2003). Following Gramsci, Birmingham school members believe that the most important kind of domination is cultural domination in which political power reproduces and reinforces itself by means of exploiting cultural institutes of ideology. Therefore, contrary to classical Marxist claim, economics is not the sole factor of the substructure of domination system, and culture is taken into account as a major factor. This is culture that makes the process of production, distribution, and consumption significant.
Culture is the location of producing meaning, and this meaning, in turn, makes domination system legitimate (or challenges its legitimacy). Opposing to classical Marxism, cultural study has a dynamic consideration of ideology and domination. Hall (1996) believes that Gramsci has a key role in cultural study and cultural study thinkers derived Marxism from Gramsci’s reformed model.

McQuillan (2003) believes that cultural study has not been started from Birmingham school and prior to it there were a great number of traditions considering cultural study. Explaining cultural study, he takes into account two criteria (of course, considering these two criteria insufficient): first, cultural study considers contemporary problems understanding, and, secondly, cultural study is sort of a criticism to social institutes and in search of metamorphosis. This criticism includes self-criticism, namely, aside from criticizing the functions of social institutes, cultural study criticizes its concepts and criteria, and this idea has been constantly dynamic and mutable. That is why Hall (1996) considers cultural study as open and unfinished project. McQuillan believes that the phrase “cultural study” is not suitable for the activities done under this title, and instead, he uses cultural analysis, and believes that: “Any act of cultural analysis (a term I would now prefer to cultural study) must be interventionist and transformative, theoretical and inaugural, performative of the idiom in which it operates, and ‘material’ in its attention to what is resistant (both singular and other) in the object it analyses”(McQuillan, 2003).

Presuppositions of cultural study

The theoretical context, from which cultural study is nourished, is a synthesis of Neo-Marxism (Gramsci and Frankfurt school) and some contemporary philosophical traditions such as philosophy of language (Wittgenstein), post-structuralism (Derrida), Hermeneutics (Heidegger and Gadamer), phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty) and feminism. Cultural study consists of the following:

Power and knowledge are interrelated

Receiving the interrelatedness of power/knowledge in the history of philosophical thoughts has been much affected by Michel Foucault. Foucault believes that knowledge construction is based upon power relations, and on the other hand, legitimizes it. Phenomenological context, in which a frame of knowledge is formalized as intellectual knowledge, is interrelated with power relations (Rouse, 2005). Of course, Foucault’s reception of power is much wider than political power, and this is one his major differentiations from the Neo-Marxist. Critical thinkers of cultural study, also, believe that power and knowledge are interrelated. Of course, contrary to Foucault’s idea, here is power related to political power or class domination. From this viewpoint, contrary to positivist sociology’s claim, knowledge is not neutral and impartial, but it has a political construction. The function of this knowledge is to legitimate a specific relation of power, and to create meaning based upon values, class interests, race or specific gender.

Hegemony is a cultural process

Following Gramsci, cultural study thinkers believe that the most important domination is cultural domination which is called hegemony. Peter Mayo defines hegemony as following: "Hegemony refers to a social situation in which 'all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class'...The emphasis here is on ruling by consent and not simply through force"(Mayo, 2010).

Explaining hegemony, Giroux believes that: "In more specific terms, hegemony refers to a form of ideological control in which dominant beliefs, values, and social practices are produced and distributed throughout a whole range of institutions, such as schools, the family, mass media, and trade unions. As the dominant ideology, hegemony functions to define the meaning and limits of common sense as well as the form and content of discourse in a society"(Giroux, 1980).

Both Giroux and Mayo believe that hegemony is an educational process; i.e. domination system, by means of social institutes and specifically educational institutes, tries to introduce its ideology as a best ideology. Giroux mentions four important functions of hegemony in relation to educational institutes:“(1) the selection of culture that is deemed as socially legitimate; (2) the categories that are used to classify certain cultural content and forms as superior or inferior; (3) the selection and legitimation of school and classroom relationships; (4) the distribution of and access to different types of culture and knowledge by different social classes”(ibid: 228).

Language has a fundamental role in the process of hegemony

As mention earlier, the major functions of hegemony are the control of production and the legitimacy of meaning, and without any doubt, this function has a close relationship with language. The emphasis on language and its active role in the process of educational domination is one of the differentiations between classical Marxism and cultural study. Like many twentieth-century philosophical movements (such as analytical philosophy, hermeneutics and post-structuralism), Gramsci pays specific attention to language which is interrelated to the concept of hegemony. He considers language as a
political problem, and, also, assumes it necessary for understanding the manner of formulation of ideas and subjectivities via culture. Of course, Gramsci studies language, not as an abstract and philosophical phenomenon, but as a practical issue and in ordinary people lives, which has a great affinity with Wittgenstein’s thoughts (Ives, 2004).

Following post-structural trends and semiology in language, cultural study develops and advances the concepts of text and textuality, and criticizes analytically the signifier-signified relation. Cultural study, for example, considers a movie as a text, and studies the signified-signifier relations in it. The purpose of cultural study from this critical analysis is to analyze to relations between meaning production and power (Hall, 1996).

**Fact and value are interrelated**

Following positivism, classical sociology believed that fact and values are separate, and the function of sociology is to understand factual events by the use of the methods like those of empirical science. From this viewpoint, truth is independent from identifying subject, and the mind of identifying subject plays the role of the reflecting mirror of truth. Neo-Marxism, along with more twentieth-century philosophical trends, was opposed to this statement. In Neo-Marxists’ view fact is interrelated with value, and in fact, human interests and ideologies are involved in constructing social facts. Making positivist tradition in sociology problematic, Giroux and Aronowitz (1997) believe that positivists claiming the separation of value from fact are in search of creating transparency and simplicity like the style of empirical science, and this statement lessens the complicated and factual position of educational phenomena into strict and ineffective which their functions are to maintain the current situation against challenges and criticism.

**Culture, as a dynamic field, has a close relation with power**

As it mentioned earlier, in cultural study’ view culture is a general and dynamic field in which meanings and identities are produced and shared. Culture has a close relation with power, and it is a field that power through which legitimates itself, and creates a necessary subjectivity for its maintenance, and applies its policies to society. Giroux illustrates culture in cultural study’ view as following: “Culture, in this instance, is the ground of both contestation and accommodation, and it is increasingly characterized by the rise of mega-corporations and new technologies that are transforming the traditional spheres of the economy, industry, society, and everyday life. Culture now plays a central role in producing narratives, metaphors, and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others. From my perspective, culture is the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns. It is also the sphere in which the translating possibilities of culture are under assault, particularly as the forces of neo-liberalism dissolve public issues into utterly privatized and individualistic concerns” (Giroux, 2004).

**Cultural study’ Features**

**Cultural study is a political and intrusive action**

Following Marxist tradition, cultural study aims at metamorphosis. In the view of McQuillan (2003) cultural study is the transforming criticism of social institutes, and for this reason, it does not restrict itself to academic borders and theory; otherwise, it loses its mission. Cultural study, in this sense, is intrusive, namely, its purpose is to change the specific social relations and to improve the situation through creating social movements or creating cognition and convergence among current anti-capitalist movements. Emancipation is one of the most important purposes of cultural study, and it means to change unequal relations and to emancipate people from the yoke of oppression and domination. Simon Critchley believes that cultural study alongside continental philosophy has three major purposes: “...Critique, praxis and emancipation... cultural study and continental philosophy are implicitly orientated by some version of a belief in the need for critique of the existing state of affairs with a view to emancipation from whatever conditions of inequality, injustice or exploitation there may be” (Cited in Bowman, 2003).

**There is an interaction between human agency and structure**

Following Gramsci, cultural study believes that human being is not subjugated by social structures. Believing in human agency is one of many differentiations of Gramsci from classical Marxism, and cultural study alongside Gramsci believes that historical determinism based on economics and production cannot explain human circumstances. In Gramsci’s view, hegemony is a dynamic and unending process, and human beings have consistently potential resistance within it (Mayo, 2010). Valentine (2003) believes that in cultural study human action has much significance, and it cannot be lessened to behavior which is under the circumstances of form. On the other hand, power is also structure-based, and it cannot be palliated to accidental relations. Thus, cultural study considers consistently the interaction between
structure and agency. Of course, the manner of this interaction is consistently one of the many challenging cultural study.

Giroux (1980), also in criticizing Correspondence theory which was coined and stated by Samuel Bowels and Herbert Gintis, stated that depending on substructure/superstructure model, based on economic relations in explaining the manner of reproduction in domination system, which are led to determinism and mechanical view, is subjugated to defeat. In Giroux's view, man encountering the process of reproduction and hegemony is not inactive; instead he/she depending on the lived experiences can resist against domination culture and have opponent reading with the texts of domination system, and consider the metamorphosis of the structures of hegemony.

**Rejuvenating political culture, cultural study is in search of dynamic social democracy**

Cultural study is a political plan whose purpose is to rejuvenate culture and cultural institutes as a general location for producing social and critical agencies. Comparing to democratic Neo-Liberalism which is based on laissez faire Laissez-faire is an economic environment in which transactions between private parties are free from Intrusive government restrictions, tariffs, and subsidies, with only enough regulations to protect property rights" and tries to turn culture into an inactive factor via depoliticizing culture, cultural study tries to magnify the bases of social democracy and/or radical democracy through rejuvenating political culture. Culture is the place of producing meaning and legitimating domination ideology and by rejuvenating political culture through magnifying the process of criticism and social participation, culture tries to break down capitalist monopolization, and to make the functions of social institutes such as schools and colleges problematic in reproducing unequal relations of power.

Giroux (2004a) believes that democracy is a dynamic and evolving idea, and instead he uses democratization which is indicating the dynamic and active dimension of democracy. Giroux’s intended democracy is a radical one in which dissimilarities are formalized, and individuals as critical and social citizens, inside this dynamic and civil society, participate in political affairs. The purpose of cultural study is to revitalize such a democracy which is sensitive to the problems such as gender and racial injustice, poverty, racism and civil morality. The output of such a democracy is to create equal relations of power for making all people to participate in politics and to oppose monopolization.

**Cultural study challenges the traditional borders**

Through consistent criticism, cultural study is in search of a sort of deconstruction whose purpose is to change borders and resistant subjectivities of unequal system of power. Explaining border pedagogy theory, Giroux believes that: "The category of border signals in the metaphorical and literal sense how power is inscribed differently on the body, culture, history, space, land, and psyche" (Giroux, 2005). He believes that pedagogy should train border-crossing people; those who challenge the current concepts and incrustations, and reconstruct the existing borders in a way that they could tolerate the existing racial, class, and gender differences. By changing borders, they want “to understand otherness in its own terms” (ibid: 20).

In cultural study’ view, the existing borders, sometimes are in service of reproducing domination system, have a social and historical construct, and why they cannot claim universality and consistency. Social facts are sort of cultural constructs that are more affected by domination system, and domination system through these social constructs wants to disseminate and expand a specific kind of worldview and morality, and to keep away any challenge from the legitimacy of capitalism. Through making problematic and characterizing the historical construction of these constructs, cultural study illuminate their relation with power relations, and through deconstruction it wants to get emancipation. In Giroux's view, crossing border is not solely limited to disclosing masculine, occidental, racial and class borders, but it consists of: " the borders of existing disciplinary knowledge do need to be challenged and refigured, it is also crucial to recognize that knowledge formation is...In this case, border pedagogy must take up the dual task of not only creating new objects of knowledge but also addressing how inequalities, power, and human suffering are rooted in basic institutional structures"(ibid: 21).

The result of this border-crossing of cultural study is to innovate concepts and new borders that provides all citizens with the possibility of active participation in achieving radical democracy.

**Cultural study is contextual**

Cultural study is deeply dependent on context, because the process of cultural study consists of the dialectic relation of theory and practice, and its problem rooted from the real concerns of specific society. This view is also another differentiation of cultural study from classical Marxism, and its movement towards postmodernism. In Giroux’s view, position-ism in cultural study: "... suggests...
that how we respond as educators and critics to the spheres in which we work is conditioned by the interrelationship between the theoretical resources we bring to specific contexts and the worldly space of publicness that produces distinct problems and conditions particular responses to them" (Giroux, 2004).

As mentioned, in understanding social facts, cultural study has an inclination to a sort of social constructivism, and believes that social facts are much affected by social relations dominating on position, and solely within these relations they are significant. By moving towards positionism, cultural study resorts to a sort of multiculturalism; therefore, the process of criticism and emancipation is based on position. Critchley believes that: "In a sense, it makes more sense to talk about emancipations, in the plural. And that’s doubtless true: we can’t subsume emancipation under some unified goal, as in the classical Marxist picture. But that doesn’t mean we should give up the notion of emancipation" (Critchley, 2003).

**Cultural study is interdisciplinary**

Cultural study is an interdisciplinary project that, beyond the existing disciplines, attempts to understand the power/culture relation (Barker, 2008). In cultural study thinkers' view academic disciplines are typically involved in creating domination, because they make knowledge fragmented by the claim of transparency and exactness, and alleviate its emancipatory feature. Cultural study makes use of the findings of other sciences such as psychology, anthropology, philosophy, art, etc. But it is not dependent on a specific discipline. In the field of methodology, cultural study does not also follow a single approach; instead it applies numerous qualitative methods such as ethnography, semiology, critical interview, etc.

**Cultural study and Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics is one of the trends that could create a new paradigm in studying sociology. Habermas (1971) considers the hermeneutic-historical interest as the major interest of science that is more in search of understanding than explaining by the way of empirical science. In studying human phenomena, hermeneutic traditions are opposed to positivist tradition which put an emphasis on the role of human minds in understanding. Human being, in the process of understanding, is not an inactive and ineffective creature, and he is actively involved in constructing and interpreting events. Gadamer, as a modern lecturer of hermeneutics believes that understanding occurs in the process of fusion of horizons. But, in the process of understanding, we are involved in two horizons: the horizon of identifying subject, and that of the subject of understanding; in the process of understanding, these two horizons are fused, and ultimately, understanding is occurred. Therefore, the horizon of identifying subject himself/herself (a set of) has an active role in understanding. From hermeneutics’ view, speaking about objective and universal events is impossible, because facts are consistently combined with contingency conditions; as a result, understanding will be relative.

In explaining hermeneutic rationalism in civil pedagogy, Giroux believes that: "Meaning in this mode of rationality is not removed from the worlds of the social actors who constitute, shape, and live within its definitions. Instead, it is seen in its most crucial form as something which is constantly negotiated and renegotiated by human beings as they mutually produce and define the constitutive rules that shape their interactions. Central to this form of rationality is the concepts of appropriation, intentionality, and intersubjectivity" (Giroux, 1980a).

Hermeneutics thinkers claim that in order to understand human behaviors one should evaluate his/her deeds in relation to his/her purpose and intent. Giroux believes that this kind of rationality has had useful achievements. Of advantages of this kind of thinking one can name: considering lived experiences, believing in active individuals’ role in constructing events, considering social facts dependency on their construction circumstances, drawing attention to social construction of knowledge and challenging the fixed and universal knowledge.

Aside from these advantages, hermeneutics has some shortcomings that prevent it from correct understanding of educational phenomena. Giroux mentions these shortcomings as following: "...interpretative accounts lacked an adequate notion of institutions or of history. The latter tradition [Hermeneutics] ignored the material landscape against which meanings were formed, negotiated, or sustained. Moreover, the over-burdened phenomenological focus on intentions and human activity neglected the issue of societal conditioning. Subjectivity thus became falsely viewed as transparent to itself, and questions concerning power, ideology, and the ethical nature of the existing society were ignored because of a naive optimism in the power of consciousness to change social reality" (Giroux, 1982).

Cultural study has made much use of hermeneutic achievements such as: putting an emphasis on individuals’ lived experiences in constructing understanding and knowledge, position-ism, social understanding of knowledge, and individuals’ active role in encountering understanding. Moreover, by criticizing some hermeneutic dimensions, cultural study believes that indifference to the material conditions effect (such as economics) in providing cultural situation, to the role of ideology in understanding, and to the interaction of human agency and structure prevents hermeneutics from correct and adequate interpreting social facts. In hermeneutic observation, culture is much idealistically considered. While following materialistic substructure
(affected by Marxism), cultural study believes that culture is the result of human interactions inside material relations (such as production relation and power relation), and without paying attention to these material conditions the analysis of culture is incomplete.

CONCLUSION

Cultural study being a new approach to research in humanities and educational study attempts to understand human phenomena inside culture, material communications (such as relations of production, consumption and distribution) and power communications. Affected by Neo-Marxist thoughts, cultural study believes that culture is a general location in which meaning and identities are constructed and shared. From this viewpoint, culture has a close relationship with power and politics, and through creating specific subjectivities, it legitimizes specific relations of power or challenges them. The major mission of cultural study is to correctly understand culture and emancipate it from the yoke of the commercialization of capitalism. Revitalizing culture as a dynamic field or location for producing multiple meaning and identities is the base and foundation of creating and strengthening dynamic social democracy. While applying and utilizing a great extent of qualitative methods of research such as ethnography and critical interview, cultural study investigates educational phenomena in relation to issues such as power, racial discrimination, economic and social inequality as well as consumerism, and its ultimate mission is to emancipate human being from any kind of domination and inequality occurring possibly in society. In order to materialize this action, cultural study considers research as an interaction between theory and practice, and believes in a kind of intervention in practice.

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