

Difference, Deconstruction, Undecidability: A Derridean interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Derrida's theoretical work in cultural theory and on the philosophy of difference 'resonates' in educational philosophy and theory. It reveals a will to reconstitute the humanist subject, which, surpassing the transcendental humanist subject, invites the play of difference in pedagogy and curriculum content knowledge, the nature of knowledge, and a questioning of the notion of universally applied notions of 'quality' and the 'expert's' knowledge based upon deference to received wisdom and 'origins'. Against a background of Derridean philosophy, it is possible to see the danger of such 'certain' approaches. Autonomous knowledge that is self-referential and invested with canonical status has represented a challenge to Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy. Derrida's thinking has encouraged us to think deeply about inherited canonical versions of epistemological status bestowed on knowledge, and also about the partial and cultural nature of knowledge.

Introduction

This article draws on Jacques Derrida's philosophy as a methodological tool for examining the notion of 'difference'. A Derridean thinking opens up spaces for educators, including art and music educators, to work towards internalising and integrating into practice contradictory notions of truth, calling into question, for example, such European hegemonic ruling categories as 'quality', 'beauty', 'art', 'taste', etc. Derrida may, for instance, in questioning the notion of 'quality' in contemporary times, go back to the notion of '*qualis*' and refer to the specificity of quality – quality of this or that kind. Derrida's philosophy of difference enables resistance to the dialectical, for conflation of the heterogeneity of the other is assured within the dialectical as is the production of singularity and universality. The reduction of heterogeneity to singularity is avoided, as difference is perceived as binary. If the representation of art, for instance, within a formalist and expressionist aesthetic has operated as an ideology, which works to possess art of meaning and to 'sanitise' the aesthetic, Derrida's philosophy of difference works to legitimate space for the partial, the messy, the unfinished, the tentative, to make space for functional and utilitarian art, to challenge and step outside the binary of what is and is not art, to challenge the ranking of one culture's art over another's.

Derrida's work helps lay the philosophical and theoretical ground to challenge practices which would anthropologise, for example, non-Western art-forms – practices which have legitimated their exclusion from art education. By the deconstruction and decoding of unified categories, his work offers an important critique of universal relevance of Western categories. Educators are encouraged

to think about the pedagogical confusions over the conceptualising of difference and diversity within difference, as well as considering an awareness of the politics of culture. 'Totality' and notions of 'closure', that are implied by discrete bodies of knowledge contained within disciplinary boundaries, are set up for interrogation under the scrutiny of Derrida, as are unified 'truths'. For Derrida, contradictory notions of 'truth' are promoted and celebrated. An examination of the ways in which monopolies over objective 'truths' have served interests of the dominant culture is thus encouraged.

At an historical moment when governments and professional bodies seek to circumscribe teachers' attitudes, skills, competencies and behaviour with a "will to certainty", a "will to truth" (see Grierson & Mansfield 2004), knowledge is uncertain and is seen to be in its "postmodern condition" (Lyotard, 1984). Complex cultural movements and transformations are occurring alongside changed epistemological, political and technological contexts. At this same historical moment, profoundly complex hybrid narratives emerging from experience and tradition confront the 'master narratives' that enframe them. Despite all of this, the 'essential' teacher of 'quality' is being politically constructed in many Western countries through philosophies of institutional education, curriculum, professional development and rafts of research that work to legitimate government policy. The 'quality' bludgeon, which has operated in the service of homogeneity in the modern and postmodern periods (Lippard, 1990), is re-instated with fervour. It is this notion of 'quality' that French philosopher Jacques Derrida would question.

For Derrida, pedagogy is an important concern. Peters (2003) argues that in proposing the examination of style and new styles of writing and thinking, Derrida is involved in "rethinking traditional humanist pedagogical practices and the founding principles of our educational institutions". This is most clearly the case with "applied forms of deconstruction in its relation to pedagogy and Derrida's investigation into the nature of writing as *différance*, such as the deconstruction of the authorial-authoritarian subject" (Peters, 2003: 64). Further, Peters points to Schrift's (1995) construction:

'Derrida develops his deconstructive critique of the subject as a privileged center of discourse in the context of his project of delegitimizing authority, whether that authority emerges in the form of the author's domination of the text, or the tradition's reading of the history of philosophy' (Schrift, 1995: 25). Derrida's deconstructive critique of authority – both the authority of the text and the history of philosophy – has an obvious relevance to pedagogy as a critique of authority of educational institutions and those that assume positions of authority in its name (Peters, 2003:78).

Below is a discussion of the *philosophy of difference* followed by Derrida's notion of *différance*, which is his radical contribution to Western philosophy.

The Philosophy of Difference

Cultural difference has been theorised by other philosopher, such as Gilles Deleuze on repetition and difference, Jean-François Lyotard on *the differend* and Michel Foucault on micropractices (see Peters, 2003). While Nietzsche and Heidegger are considered the founding fathers of the philosophy of difference (see Smart, 1996), it is the work of Jacques Derrida that is of particular importance here. His contribution to the philosophy of difference can be regarded as part of the diagnosis of limits and limitations to the modern project. This section, prefaced by a brief discussion of the history of the philosophy of difference, examines the philosophy of difference as articulated by Derrida, within the notion of *difference*.

Poststructuralist philosophical approaches interrogate rationality based upon traditional logocentrism and corrode established teleological frames of reference (Peters, 1995). Poststructuralism ought to be examined in conjunction with an understanding of structuralism, and "as both a reaction against and an escape from Hegelian thought" (Peters, 1996: 22). Identity does not have to be defined in terms of 'self and other' in which there is negation of the 'other'. The escape

from Hegelianism, in Gilles Deleuze's terms, "involves the celebration of the 'play of difference' against the 'labour of the dialectic'" (Peters, 1996: 22). Deleuze's *Nietzsche et al Philosophie* (1962) represents, according to Peters, "one of the inaugural moments of French Poststructuralism providing an interpretation that highlights the 'play of Difference' using it as a central underpinning of a polemic attack on the Hegelian dialectic". "The Games of Will to Power against the Labor of the Dialectic" taken from Deleuze's *Nietzsche et al Philosophie* (1962), encapsulates, for Peters, "the French Nietzschean critique of Hegel as a basis for the liberation of the logic of difference and for the poststructuralist reappraisal of the philosophy of difference". According to Peters, Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche "is situated within the wider reaction to Hegelianism in contemporary French thought in order to characterize poststructuralism's rejection of the dialectic and the notion of totality" (Peters, 1996: 14). Deleuze, in drawing attention to Nietzsche's attack on the Hegelian dialectic, writes:

Three ideas define the dialectic: the idea of a power of the negative as a theoretical principle manifested in opposition and contradiction; the idea that suffering and sadness have value, the valorisation of the 'sad passions', as a practical principle manifested in splitting and tearing apart; the idea of positivity as a theoretical principle and practical product of negation itself. It is no exaggeration to say that the whole of Nietzsche's philosophy, in its polemic sense, is the attack on these three ideas (Deleuze, 1983 cited in Peters, 1996: 22).

The poststructuralist critique of the Hegelian dialectic, the Hegelian definition of 'self and other', involves a recognition that "the positive is achieved only through the double negation, 'the negation of negation'". This "double negation" is "contrasted with a positive view of difference, with the purely positive power of affirmation inherent in 'difference' as the basis of a radical thought and philosophy that is not Hegelian..." (Peters, 1996: 22). Peters points further to Deleuze's interpretation:

The Hegelian dialectic is indeed a reflection on difference, but it inverts its image. For the affirmation of difference as such it substitutes the negation of that which differs; for the affirmation of the self it substitutes the negation of the other, and for the affirmation of affirmation it substitutes the famous negation of negation (Deleuze, 1983 cited in Peters, 1996: 22-23).

To the extent that education itself participates in the "ideological construction of the liberal subject of education" (Peters, 1996: 23), education needs to understand its own part in this construction and the significance of the poststructuralist critique of the subject for such an analysis. What is the significance of this critique of the liberal subject for education? The 'subject of certainty' is an irritant to Derrida's thinking. His cultural theoretical work helps us in teacher education to ponder upon the idea of the "decentered", "repositioned" subject (Peters, 2003: 62). The teaching subject has been repositioned, de-centred in the conditions of postmodernity (see Peters, 2003: 71). Derrida would be likely to demand that the concepts of 'educational professionalism' and the 'teacher' be examined for their signs of production, for their history and culture.

Différance

Derrida's neologism *différance* is part of his "greater critical method called deconstruction" (Appleby et al 1996: 435). According to Egéa-Kuehne (1996), in *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1975) he employs the notion of *différance*, and a scheme of differential relationships, to erode the notions of identity and sameness underpinning the metaphysics of presence and to rethink the nature of knowledge.

For Derrida, 'logocentric' assumptions reside within the spoken word in a more uncompromising way than they do the written word. Thus, in this early work Derrida writes that the overwhelming of metaphysics, "which he claims Heidegger failed to accomplish in the poetic turn taken by his later philosophy" (Hogan, 2003: 285), might be better accomplished by "deconstruction" in the reading of texts and canons. For Derrida, such a deconstructive reading of canons and texts requires the following:

[I]t inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition, but the deconstruction, of all significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of truth. All the metaphysical determinations of truth, and even the one beyond metaphysical ontotheology that Heidegger reminds us of, are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos (Derrida, 1976: 10).

The play of what Derrida named *différance* is central to this deconstructive reading of canons and texts. He announced in a 1968 address entitled the *Différance*, “that this coinage ... described neither a concept nor a word, but rather, a twofold strategic theme” (Hogan, 2003: 285). In the first instance, *différance* (deferral) aims to defy or frustrate philosophy’s fixation with conclusive or authoritative meanings by deferring indefinitely (delaying until the future) any irrefutable disclosures of meaning “or ‘presence’ in the relation between human beings and Being” (285). In the second instance, *différance* (difference) aims to preserve the play of an unhinged and moveable multiplicity of possibilities. This means eternal undecidability can resist all attempts at the final buttoning down of the territory of meaning, “every effort to don certain meanings with the status of a canon, or ‘truth’” (Derrida, 1984: 7ff, see Hogan, 2003).

Jacques Derrida’s approach to philosophy, particularly the Western tradition, reflects upon and undermines a dependence on the logic of identity. Derrida, in *Positions* (1981), calls into question the designation of the meaning of Being as “presence”. As Lechte (1994: 106) points out the logic of identity derives from Aristotle, and in Bertrand Russell’s words, comprises these key features:

1. *The law of identity*: ‘Whatever is, is.’
2. *The law of contradiction*: ‘Nothing can both be and not be.’
3. *The law of excluded middle*: ‘Everything must either be or not be.’

These laws of thought presuppose a logical coherence as they simultaneously allude to another profound element of the Western philosophical tradition – that there is an origin, “an essential reality” – to which these laws refer. To preserve coherence of logic, this origin is to be “simple” (unable to be contradicted), homogeneous “(of the same substance or order) present to, or the same as itself (i.e. separate and distinct from any mediation, conscious of itself without any gap between the origin and the consciousness” (Letche, 1994: 106). Complexity, mediation, and difference are excluded from these laws. It is at a broader and “metaphysical level” that this process of exclusion takes place: a level, moreover, at which a “whole system of concepts (sensible-intelligible; ideal-real; internal-external; fiction-truth; nature culture; speech-writing; activity-passivity, etc.) governing the operation of thought in the West, come to be instituted” (Letche, 1994: 106).

In Derrida’s 1967 book *Writing and Difference* (1978 English) in which his radicalism for education as a revealing encounter with differing cultural traditions emerges clearly, Derrida denigrates philosophy’s shortcomings in overcoming metaphysics. Heidegger, in his later philosophy, Derrida believes, had taken an unfortunate path as he tried to redeem a more traditional appreciation of the relationship between beings and Being (see Hogan, 2003). Derrida’s *différance* wants to tear asunder this uncritical respect – this deference – for obscured origins, as he discerns in it a sense of ‘totality’, which brings forth metaphysical endeavours to gather and unify all forms of understanding. Derrida’s approach then is one which is no longer turned towards the origin; his approach is one that:

affirms play, and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other words through his entire history – has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play (Derrida, 1978: 292).

Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist criticism, focusing on the written text, challenges structuralism’s claim that a text’s meaning can be determined by appeal to a transcendental signified “or that meaning is outlined in binary distinctions and oppositions” (Cherryholmes, 1988: 36). Derrida argues that meaning is not centred or fixed because it is caught in a *play* of references between words and

definitions where texts only give the appearance of stability but have no centre, no transcendental signified, no transcendental semantic meaning. For Derrida meanings are scattered throughout language and deferred in time, which suggests that “structures of meaning” (Cherryholmes, 1988: 36) are mere illusions.¹ The “decentering motif” (Appleby *et al*, 1996: 435) *différance* enables us to surpass mere binary oppositions (good/bad, male/female) and as a conceptual tool, neutralises them.

Derrida (1978: 437) in his early essay, *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, refers to the neutralisation of the structure by the “process of giving it a centre, or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin”. The balancing organising function of this centre limits “the *play* of structure”. He criticises the structure’s centre for closing off the play “which it opens up and makes possible”:

As centre, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the centre, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden. ... The concept of a centred structure is in fact the concept of play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. ... on the basis of ... the centre (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, can also indifferently be called the origin or end, archē, or telos), repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always taken from a history of meanings [sens] – that is, in a word, a history – whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence (1978: 437).

He argues that structure on the basis of full presence is beyond play. Yet the process of signification “orders the displacement and substitutions for this law of central presence” and the “centre” has “no natural site ... was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions come into play” (Derrida, 1978: 438) (resemblances, repetitions, shadows, virtualities). Derrida notes the “tension between play and presence”, noting that “play is the disruption of presence” and is always a “play of absence and presence” (1978: 447). He wishes to accent difference and define irreducibility and its *différance*. We are advised to relish marginality, to indulge in alterity and antinomy, and to reject a devotion to the affirmation or denial of subjectivity and dualisms. Dualisms, for Derrida, are “the bane of Western metaphysics” (Appleby *et al*, 1996: 435).

Pointing to Derrida, Cherryholmes suggests that meanings are scattered from word, to definition, “to definitions of words in definitions, and so on” (1988: 38). Saussure’s “structural concept of the sign” is thus destroyed by this scattering of meanings – resulting “proposed categories of inclusion and exclusion” breaking down.

He continues (1988: 38): “Transcendental signifieds represent commitments of a sign system. Deconstructive criticism exposes these commitments and, in the process, shows how the logic of a text embarrasses and contradicts itself.” Derrida writes, “I do not believe, that some day it will be possible *simply* to escape metaphysics” (1981: 17). Cherryholmes (1988: 38-39) explains:

A transcendental signified is metaphysical commitment. By this is meant a commitment that does not require rational, scientific, logical justification. We are always caught in a play of references, traces of meaning, meanings dispersed in language and deferred in time. The denial of a fixed centre under-mines a structural sense of meaning, giving rise to the term poststructural. ... Because meanings are dispersed and deferred, the binary distinctions and oppositions by which structures are ordered give way and can often be shown to depend upon each other as a result of meanings ...

Through ‘deconstruction’ Derrida instigates a profound investigation “into the nature of the Western metaphysical tradition and its basis in the law of identity” (Cherryholmes, 1988: 39). Derrida is concerned to free up the philosophical terrain in order that “creativity and invention” (Lechte, 1994: 107) might flourish. His notion of difference, or *différance*, is an expression of this desire.

Derrida, in *Margins of Philosophy* (1982: 3) states:

I would like to attempt ... to reassemble in a sheaf different directions in which I have been able to utilize what I would call provisionally the word or concept of *différance*, or rather to let it impose itself on me in its neographism, although as we shall see, *différance* is neither a word nor a concept ... the word sheaf seems to mark more appropriately that the assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning – or of force – to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others.

In *Positions* Derrida (1981: 8-9) explains what he means by *différance*:

Différance refers to the (active and passive) movement ... What defers presence ... is the very basis on which presence is announced or desired in what represents it, its signs, its trace ... Second, the movement of *différance* ... What I have attempted to do would not have been possible without the openings of Heidegger's questions ... without the attention to what Heidegger calls Being and Beings, the ontological difference such as, in a way it remains unthought by philosophy.

Derrida writes (1981: 49): "I have attempted to systematize a deconstructive critique precisely against the authority of meaning, as the *transcendental signified*". Further, he states:

The metaphysical character of the concept of history is not only linked to linearity but to an entire system of implications (teleology, eschatology, elevating and interiorizing accumulation of meaning, a certain type of traditionality, a certain concept of continuity, of truth, etc.) (1981: 57).

Derrida and Structuralism

Derrida created the term *différance* in the course of his investigations into the Saussurian and structuralist theory of language.² "Structuralism is a systematic way of thinking about whole processes and institutions whereby each part of a system defines and is defined by other parts" (Cherryholmes, 1988: 13). Deconstruction, a form of poststructuralist criticism:

questions whether proposed first principles that purportedly ground structuralist programmes and meanings ever transcend our texts and discourse practices. If no transcendent first principles exist, then our structures are not as fixed and 'structured' as they might appear, because every term or element is always defining every other term or element and vice versa and back and forth with no clear-cut beginning and ending (Cherryholmes, 1988: 13).

According to Cherryholmes (1988: 19), "structuralist thought³ has been influenced by the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure". Saussure proposed retaining the word *sign* to "designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* and *signifier*" (Saussure cited in Cherryholmes, 1988: 19). Signs, for Saussure, "are arbitrary, because words are linked to definitions by conventions and usages; for example different languages assign different words to concepts" (Cherryholmes, 1988: 20). Signs (*signifier-signified* for Saussure) exist within a system and not outside it. "Saussure's structural analysis attends to signs and not objects; it is concerned with signifying practices, the way language is organised and used" (Cherryholmes, 1988: 20). Meaning for words derives from their relationships to and differences from other words. "There is a distinction between language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*). Structuralism focuses on language and not particular utterances" (Cherryholmes, 1988: 21).⁴ Further, because language is determined by relationships or differences among words, binary distinctions or oppositions determine the content of the structure. Seung writes:

Binary distinctions is the simplest logical device for discrimination, namely between having a quality or attribute and not having it, or between belonging to a class and not belonging to it. It underlies every assertion to denial (cited in Cherryholmes, 1988: 22).

Finally, because it promotes "description and mapping", structuralism claims to be "ideologically neutral" and therefore is similar to logical positivism. It subtly endorses the status quo. Cherryholmes

argues that an important “objection to structuralism is that structural assumptions contain arguments that subvert themselves. This objection led to poststructural analysis and criticism” (1988: 31). Derrida, for example, points out that “Saussure powerfully contributed to turning against the metaphysical tradition the concept of the sign that he borrowed from it” (Derrida, 1981: 18), and that “from the moment that one questions the philosophy of such a transcendental signified, and that one recognises that every signified is also in the position of a signifier, the distinction between signified and signifier becomes problematic at its root” (Derrida, 1981: 20).

While Saussure had laboured over showing “that language in its most general form could be understood as a system of differences, ‘without positive terms’”, Derrida claimed that the wider implications of this conception were “not appreciated by either latter-day structuralists, or Saussure himself” (Lechte, 1996: 107). For Derrida, “difference becomes the proto-type of what remains outside the scope of Western metaphysical thought because it is the latter’s condition of possibility” (Lechte, 1996: 107).

Saussure’s theory of language provided Derrida with further justification for his neologism. Lechte explains (1994: 107):

writing, Saussure has said, is secondary to the speech spoken by the members of the linguistic community. Writing for Saussure is even a deformation of language in the sense that it is (through grammar) taken to be a true representation of it, whereas, in fact, the essence of language is only contained, Saussure claimed, in living speech, which is always changing. Derrida interrogates this distinction.

Lechte continues, arguing that Derrida “notices that Saussure and the structuralists (c.f. Levi-Strauss) operate with a colloquial notion of writing, one that attempts to evacuate all complexities”. Thus writing, it is thought:

is purely graphic ... but secondary to speech. ... Speech ... is assumed to be closer to thought, and thus to the emotions ... and intentions of the speaker. Speech as primary and more original thus contrasts with the secondary, representative status of writing (Lechte, 1994: 107).

But Derrida attempts to show the unsustainability of this distinction. The term *différance* contains a “graphic element” which is irreducible and undetectable “at the level of voice” (Lechte, 1994: 108). In Derrida’s own words:

...let me recall that this discreet graphic intervention ... came to be formulated in the course of a written investigation of a question about writing. Now it happens ... that this graphic difference (a instead of e), this marked difference between two apparently vocal notations, between two vowels, remains purely graphic: it is read, or its written, but it cannot be heard ... The a of *différance*, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet ... (1982: 3-4).

He refers to *différance* as “that which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing”, “and which is located ... *between* speech and writing ...” (Derrida, 1982: 5). Derrida asks:

What am I to do in order to speak of the a of *différance*? It goes without saying that it cannot be exposed. One can expose only that which at a certain moment can become present, that which can be shown, presented as something present, a being-present (5).

Arguing that *différance* cannot be reduced to the notion of being – a full presence – Derrida (1982: 6) continues:

Already we have had to delineate that *différance* is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not, that is, everything; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. ... *Différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding without return.

Writing, then, “is always impure, and challenges the notion of identity, and ultimately the notion of origin as ‘simple’.⁵ It is neither entirely present nor absent, but is the trace resulting from its own erasure in the drive towards transparency” (Lechte, 1994: 108). *Différance* is not just an identity or the difference between two identities. Difference is difference deferred (in French the same verb [*différer*] means both “to differ” and “to defer”).

Western metaphysics, for Derrida, literally undoes itself and is characterised by a “metaphysics of presence – a desire to overcome occluding circuits of signification and interpretation and to gain direct or immediate access to reality” (Smart, 1996: 401-402). “But this is unrealisable”, Smart argues:

for reason is necessarily burdened with language and cannot achieve self-authenticating truth. There is no possibility of an unmediated access to reality, for the logic of analysis is itself constituted through various visual and spatial metaphors. Reason then cannot dispel the opacity of intertextuality, and this is one of the ways in which Derrida’s much celebrated, derided, and misunderstood observation that ‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ (1967: 227) has been read. But this is a limited reading (1996: 402).

Derrida’s notion of *text* – his new concept of writing – needs to be considered carefully. Derrida argues that the idea of text and deconstructive practices are not limited to “books, discourses, and conceptual semantics alone” (Smart, 1996: 402). Text is “extended ‘almost without limit’ to encompass not only systems of thought but also the social and political institutions in which they are articulated, that is why ‘there is nothing beyond the text’” (cited in Smart, 1996: 402). Arguing that “we privilege phonetic writing only by ethnocentrism” (Derrida, 1981: 25), Derrida emphasises a new concept of writing in the following passage:

... the entire phonologist or logocentrist logic becomes problematical. Its range of legitimacy becomes narrow and superficial. This delimitation, however, is indispensable if one wants to be able to account for the principle of difference, such as Saussure himself recalls it. This principle compels us not only to privilege one substance – here the phonic, so called temporal substance – while excluding another – for example, the graphic, so-called spatial substance – but even to consider every process of signification as a formal play of differences. That is of traces.... Of course it is not a question of resorting to the same concept of writing and of simply inverting the dissymmetry that now has become problematical. It is a question, rather, of producing a new concept of writing. This concept can be called *gram* or *différance*. The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid ... that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the course of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without reference to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only everywhere, differences and traces of traces (1981: 26).

Derrida criticises the structuralist proposition, which posits language systems as closed. He sees this as “universally determining of human culture” (Schulte-Sasse, 1984: xxi). Derrida, in his own words, writes:

The *gram* as *différance*, then is a structure and a movement no longer conceivable on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive (the *a* of *différance* indicates this indecision as concerns activity and passivity, that which cannot be governed by or distributed between the terms of this opposition) ... it is also the becoming-space of the spoken chain – which has been called temporal or linear; which makes possible both writing and every correspondence between speech and writing, every passage from one to the other. ... The activity or productivity ... connoted by the *a* of *différance* refers to the generative movement in the play of differences ... Differences are the effects of transformations, and ... the theme of *différance* is incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motifs in the concept of structure (Derrida, 1981: 27).

To demonstrate the connection of Derrida’s philosophy to modernism, Schulte-Sasse (1984) distinguishes some key characteristics of that philosophy. Derrida’s stress is first on language, but

language is emphasised as the means to unlocking other issues. For Derrida language is a “differential and material system – itself never closed or total” (Schulte-Sasse, 1984: xxi) but it is always in motion. Language as such not only structures thought, but is also engraved and imprinted on all thought. Our discursive cognition and evaluation of reality is, in other words, predetermined by a trans-subjective linguistic field, the construction of which is effected by the constant but never fully successful effort of metaphysical or logocentric exclusions and closures. Derrida, however, is not so much interested in the simple fact that thought is determined by language as in the consequences that this thesis has for the conception of a perceiving and signifying subject.⁶

He starts by finding fault with and moving beyond the structuralist contention that suggests “automatic and closed language systems, universally determining human culture” (Schulte-Sasse, 1984: xxi). Derrida illustrates that the “structuralist assumption of such a system” is entrapped in metaphysical thinking “as well, since it proceeds from the notion of a totalized system of the signified” (xxi).

The subject ceases to be a “self-assured centre of his [her] own opinions and perceptions ... but he [she] is always lost in the chain and texture of signifiers” (Schulte-Sasse, 1984: xxi). Derrida’s effort to illustrate the way in which the “play of the signifier” is forever undermining “human efforts to arrest meaning (e.g., through the working of tropes and images)”, enables him to “subject to thorough criticism the notion of representation”, and also “that of a perceiving subject who can acquire systems of representation” (Schulte-Sasse, 1984: xxi).

According to Schulte-Sasse (1984: xxi): “the subject as a centre of thought is necessarily disseminated in the field of language – and this means in the field of a language whose structure is determined by the structure of the signifiers, the differential articulation of phonetic material”. Derrida thus reads constantly the works of other thinkers critically in an attempt to show:

that these works characteristically repress the constitutive import of the signifier – a repression that leads epistemologically to the hypostatization of the subject as the centre of will and knowledge, and to the solidification of an allegedly objectifiable systematic knowledge in the form of logocentric and metaphysical closures. ... Derridean terms such as ‘repetition’ and ‘presence’ have to be understood in this context. The self-confident subject of idealistic cognition theory conceives of himself as self-present; i.e., his presence is allegedly determined by his own autonomous activities. Such a self regards language as merely belated embodiment and representation of content previously present in his own consciousness but fails to recognize that every sign is a priori constituted by the possibility of its repetition, a repetition, that implies that consciousness is a priori interwoven with the chain of signifiers (Schulte-Sasse, 1984: xxi-xxii).

Supplementary thoughts

This article has opened the way for the exploration of the aesthetics, epistemologies, values of marginalised groups and mainstream traditions, inserting culture and ‘difference’ into aesthetic value and postulating an *aesthetics of difference*. Derridean philosophy underlines and insists upon the centrality of catering for subjectivities and identities based upon difference.

Derrida’s theoretical work, when carried over into the educational arena has encouraged visions beyond and outside our own self-centred cultural meanings. His philosophy helps us to question the notion of the ‘essential’ teacher and its attendant ‘quality’ teaching ‘behaviour’, to question ingrown and essentialised views of ‘research’ on education and teaching practice promoting an awareness of possible dangerous deletions of knowledge in situations where a ‘will to certainty’ is promoted at official levels. The limitations of an ‘essential’ structure to teacher education which might enframe the capacity to reflect is, in principle, pointed to by Derrida’s critique of the structuralist philosophy in which he finds the *centre* of the structure is in a state of stasis – at “the end of play”. Derrida heightens our awareness of the dangers of oppositional thinking (binary oppositions) in Western metaphysics and the exclusionary ethics and practices that must

result from such thinking. The complexities of professionalism and the need for multiplicity of interpretation resonates with Derrida's philosophical methodology. His poststructuralist theories have worked to promote understanding of the necessary requirement of de-essentialising learning sites, knowledge, theory, aesthetics and ethics. This is the debate over inclusion: whose knowledge and which knowledge will have status.

It is perhaps fitting to end with some thoughts of two leading Derridean scholars, namely Michael Peters and Peter Trifonas. Peters clarifies the relation of Derrida and deconstruction to pedagogy: "Derridean philosophy offers an active interpretation, resistance, and re-evaluation of humanist pedagogy, of forms of pedagogy based on the sovereign subject – which is to say, the predominant forms of pedagogy existing today that structure our pedagogical institutions, theories and practices" (2003: 64). Pointing to Derrida, Peters (2003: 78) argues that:

the prospect of a critical pedagogy of difference, of a genuinely multicultural and internationalist pedagogy suitable for the future, is located at the interstices and the interplay between a 'democracy to come' and a 'subject to come', a global subject whose critical function is to both initiate and interrogate the new international.

Trifonas regards deconstruction as an obligation which grants or acknowledges the plurality of voice and interpretation, avoiding or counteracting "the teaching of a [mere] normative ethics of teaching" and insists upon the "the impossibility of gaining access to a single and determinate truth" (2003: 234). Truth is interpretively complex, highly decorative rather than plain and simple, opaque and unclear, arguable (contestable) and with every possibility of opposition. Deconstruction keeps open in an impetuous and dynamic engagement those questions which would be foreclosed by deference to riches of traditionally authoritative canons. A productive approach is therefore opened up to the "rewriting of the subject" via deconstruction and the "reaffirming [of] the utility and necessity of recognising the presence of an other beyond a pedagogy of the selfsame based on the immediacy of the voice" (Trifonas, 2003: 224). The new, the different, the hybrid require, for their understanding, a context and this requires of education interpretive strategies more complex than connoisseurship as the basis of selection for knowledge.

Notes

1. See also Cherryholmes (1988: 36) for a discussion of the way in which "dispersed meanings turn structural assumptions against themselves".
2. Structuralist and positivist modes of thought dominate texts and discourse-practices of contemporary education (Cherryholmes, 1988: 13). The *Draft Arts* (1999) document, as an educational text symbolic of 'discourse-practice', exemplifies this claim.
3. Structuralism is promoted as orderly, organised, and rational analysis, and educational discourse-practices in the 1980s, according to Cherryholmes (1988: 31), remain heavily influenced by structuralist assumptions.
4. See Cherryholmes, (1988: 21) for T. K. Seung's description of the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*.
5. Art as 'text', (rather than the closed and finished 'work of art'), involving an "unlimited weaving of textuality" (Huysens, 1986: 209) also challenges the notion of 'identity', full presence as being, and the authorial status of the artist.
6. If language structures thought, then the individual perceiving subject in the art or music classroom that attempts to cater to difference, must be spoken to in a culturally sensitive manner that includes recognition of some of the aesthetic categories of difference as they are recognised in language. This calls for, in schools and teacher education, the importance of the use of differing cultural leaders' areas of expertise in music, dance, art, and all areas of the curriculum. etc., and indeed, the breaking down of conventional disciplinary and 'subjects' borders.

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