Academic Speech Therapy: a provocation, using performative autoethnography

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Two of my brothers had speech therapy. My eldest brother had a pronounced stammer throughout his childhood and now, even as an adult, when emotions get the better of him. My younger brother gets away with an occasional stutter. One of the problems with contemporary Universities is that educationalists, and by this, I mean the whole class of teaching and support staff, academics and managers, have forgotten how to speak. This also means we have forgotten how to speak about education.

I thought I had escaped this particular affliction because I used to speak very quickly, and fluently, using all the vocabulary at my 'Institutional' disposal, vocabulary that my undergraduate degree had grafted onto my speech, that allowed my family to comment on the change in who I had become. My academic accent grew broad and thick, the more I specialized, the more I reproduced my knowledge in writing. This became the fast-paced disciplinary classification task of research, pedagogy, of a particular managerial kind that allows insider references of increasing subtlety, that constitutes acculturated habitus and distinction. Hence cultural capital is embodied (Bourdieu, 1986, p.17) and constitutes invisible pedagogies (Bernstein, 2003, p.201) whose currency is a learnt language of long sentences, multi-syllabic words and complex grammar; supported by references and evidence. Plus, a certain attitude.

Teaching and commuting between both Brighton and London, I am often conscious of my surprise when I approach The Shard at London Bridge Station, a modernist skyscraper I thought had perished as a design strategy. Here it emerges as a status symbol and successful regeneration concept. Through its layered distinctions, proceeding upward from a ground floor of administrative servitude up to singular surveillance point, expensive, transparent, invisible, it is a Palace in the Sky, balanced on a needlepoint.

I grew up in 1970's Britain, where to be non-white in an all-white area meant that we, my brothers and I, experienced being called numerous offensive terms on the way to school. And on the way home we were told to "go home", "go back to where you came from", "go back to the jungle". And I had to puzzle, in my 8-year-old mind, why these words were not spoken to me in school by other white children? Yet, possibly, worse than being called names was that of being made to feel 'invisible'. That is the chill I feel when simply being 'accepted'. Being judged by my appearance, my skin, I discovered that the limits to our friendliness are entirely self-imposed. Unfortunately, my brown skin was an object of grading, akin to the ethnic classes of colonial administrators (Amselle 1990, p.22 in Simon, Piche, Gagnon 2015, p.5). All those things we do not choose, become part of our identity. Friendships we do not make, likewise. As a child I myself became as prejudiced as any, educated by all-white staff, an all-white curriculum, with all-white language, and, objective, rational all-white thinking, that is, with no knowledge of British rule or cultural exchange, we are, by default, racist, unless educated otherwise.

Who can honestly say they have escaped patriarchy and not internalised those power dynamics? We should neither be surprised, nor shocked, at institutional racism, simply responsible. As American black academic Moton and collaborator Harney encourage us: 'Worry about the University'. We might agree with them that: 'it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment' (2013, p.26).

Being born here of Anglo-Indian-Portuguese heritage allows me experience of three boundaries: class, 'caste' and colour. Bourdieu and Bernstein have generated a significant secondary literature explaining how inequality is perpetuated, and, just as British culture has been touched by migration, from our patios (Spanish) to our bungalows (Hindi), from the fens (German) to our sky (Scandanavian), then almost every topic in every discipline has a cultural history related to Empire it is now our responsibility to unpack and describe. The world-renowned British education system has yet to flower in my opinion, because we have yet to fully express our cultural pluralism. Or take the educational responsibility our historic riches have endowed us.

I'm reminded that since 1940 the IBGE Brazilian institute of Geography and Statistics has used the racial categories branco (white), pardo (brown), amarelo (yellow), preto (black) and indigena (indigenous). However, many if not most people disagree with these categories (Oliveira, 1997, in Petrucelli 2007). Petrucelli classified people's means of identifying their own racial category into 136 overall, including the ambiguous term "Moreno" ("tanned", or "with an olive complexion")" and cor-de-burro-quando-foge (literally, "the colour of a donkey that has run away" (Wikipedia).

In the field of critical education there is a special place for the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. He defined 'illiteracy' very clearly: 'unlettered cultures, full of voices and spoken words, do not have illiteracy… illiteracy is a restriction and a violence to the right of people to participate in culture, which those who know and use the written word must not carry out (unpublished interview)'. Gloria Jean Watkins' friendship with Freire, demonstrates the genuine making of feeling. One of the key messages she gives to the University is at the outset of her book Teaching to Transgress (1994) that we need, using Freire's words: 'to refuse to bureaucratize the mind'.

We lose the power of speech when we lose the power of thought, one based on the true power of authentic feeling. By acknowledging, welcoming and embracing the stranger we are no longer, as Kristeva describes, Strangers to Ourselves (1991).

My father, an immigrant escaping India with his life, after British administrative partition, in the late 40's, arrived here with a tacit 'boarding school education': an RP accent, an ability to box, fencing training, photos of a stint in the Hockey team, a deep love of the English language, yet very little social capital. Hence, he was desk-bound, in the corporate world of petrochemicals, forever a Clerk, too 'different' to promote, unable to say he would 'prefer not to' carry out his administrative duties to the letter (Melville, 1996).

Culture is both internalised through the body and externalised in curricula, behaviour, and buildings. As educators we have to ask ourselves, how do we communicate complexity without using types of verbal (and non-verbal) language, and attitudes, that restrict participation of students? If our institutions are not diversified, curricula taught with critical compassion, we violently exclude student's experience of their own culture. Having also begun my teaching career helping adults who could not read or write, I let my students teach me before I know how to help them. I had to learn, first, how to question the authority I spoke with. I had to enquire into my own cultural inheritance, then theirs. This is horizontal, experiential, not expert, vertical, discourse (Bernstein, 2000, p.158 in McLean, Abbas, Ashwin, 2013, p.10).

As a singer, however, my Dad found true creative expression, choosing deeply emotional songs, rendered with a warm and resonant, well enunciated, grainy, voice that was, well, extraordinary. His stage name reflected knowing irony, Steve Moreno. My father modelled for me how to think-with-feeling, one interpretation of Freire's injunction, something that education should properly do, and we, as educators, should adequately articulate.