
Opinion & Perspective

Shared Interpretations and Dialogic Learning: A Reply to Holland

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When I heard from the editor that my recent article entitled *An Ethnographic Interpretation of Disciplinary Power within the EFL Classroom* (Hanaki, 2007a) had received a response, I was both excited and concerned. I was excited because nothing seems better to a fledgling researcher than receiving a response to his own writing; at the same time, I was concerned at the thought that my writing might have troubled at least one reader to the extent of compelling them to write a response. In this case, the writer, Sarah Holland, offered a critique mostly centering on my use of the term “ethnographic” and my application of Foucault’s notion of “discipline.”

Holland identifies some weaknesses in my writing that could mislead readers due to problematic understandings of the academic practice of ethnography and Foucault’s conceptualization of power, among other issues. **I accept these criticisms, but would like to argue** that Holland has misinterpreted my intention in applying an image of the Panopticon to EFL classrooms.

Holland’s first major criticism focuses on my use of the term “ethnography.” Quoting Watson-Gegeo (1988, p. 575), Holland argues that my study is “impressionistic and superficial rather than careful and detailed.” Holland goes on to contend that my reflection does not meet the essential criteria of ethnography, such as “taking a holistic perspective, making detailed and prolonged observations of a social group in a natural setting, offering an emic viewpoint,...interviewing the participants, and developing a culturally specific framework” (2008,

p. X). Further, Holland points out that my writing does not provide the kind of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30) that allows the readers to visualize what was actually happening in the classroom.

If the aforementioned criteria have to be fulfilled to justify the use of the term “ethnography,” and my use of the term has the potential to disturb the “true” ethnographers (of which Holland is presumably one), I would prefer to reword my research as “reflective interpretation.” Before doing that, however, I would like to emphasize that I used the term “ethnography” not from my disregard for this research practice but from my deep respect for it and for the masterful ethnographic writings of such scholars as Clifford Geertz (1973) and Erving Goffman (1959). I believe that this type of inductive approach to research brings a deep insight into human interactions within EFL classrooms and any other cultural communities. Therefore, I attempted to contribute to the wider acceptance of ethnographic research tradition in the TESOL field by referring to my own study as ethnographic. As the data for my reflective interpretation was obtained inductively through my own teaching experiences over eighteen months, I thought that it would not be inappropriate to present it as an example of ethnographic writing, in a broader sense. If this claim could be seen to damage the reputation of ethnography as a rigorous academic practice, however, I would prefer to refrain from using the term in this instance.

The second major criticism offered by Holland focuses on my “atypical interpretation” of Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power (p. X). As Holland recognizes rightly, it would be nonsense to assert the “correct” interpretation of texts produced by such complex thinkers as Foucault, whose intellectual scope spans from structuralism to poststructuralism. At the same time, it would also be true that one could present more reasonable, persuasive, and heuristic interpretations of such texts than others do. My understanding of Foucault is that he tends to conceptualize “power” as both restrictive and enabling forces. The treatment of power as an enabling force is most apparent in

Foucault's later works such as *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976/1990), which was quoted by Holland. However, at some points, Foucault seems to have focused much of his attention onto the "analysis" (not advocacy) of the restrictive dimension of power, and it could be argued that *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1995) represents such a text. While Foucault (1976/1990) recognizes "the omnipresence of power" (p. 93) perhaps more than any other major social theorist, and thus introduces a radically new way of understanding the function of power within societies, the scope of his analysis naturally includes the restricting dimension of power (as well as the enabling dimension). In my recent article, I did not attempt to propose a comprehensive picture of Foucault's philosophical stance (if such an attempt is ever possible); rather, I purposefully employed Foucault's insights particularly into the restricting aspect of power. Perhaps, I should have emphasized this point more clearly to avoid misleading some readers.

Holland criticizes my article as "soul-destroyingly weighted toward control and discipline" (p. X) and states that she was disturbed by my application of an image of the Panopticon to EFL classrooms and the resulting link between prisoners and students. Further, she identifies some problematic expressions of mine, such as "imposed willingness to learn" (Hanaki, 2007a, p. 19), "teacher's gaze" (p. 25), and "pedagogical surveillance" (p. 27), which she argues could damage a humanistic approach to EFL education.

While I acknowledge that some of my expressions might sound too forceful, demanding, and even authoritarian to some readers, I used these terms, in fact, to realize engaged, cooperative, dialogic learning communities. It might sound paradoxical, but I explored the restrictive dimension of disciplinary power within EFL classrooms in order to support each student to become "an agent of his or her own learning endeavor" (Hanaki, 2007b, p. 12). As Holland herself does, I also respect my students' exercise of power (even if it is an expression of resistance) and their autonomy in decision-making. However, I

also believe that students sometimes need some sort of restriction, coercion, or control, a little push from someone to perform to the best of their potential. Perhaps, I should have called that little push “encouragement”; however, I rather chose to use the term “discipline” or some other related word with negative connotations in order to make a clear parallel to the Foucault’s philosophical image of the Panopticon. Further, I should emphasize that I treated the “Panopticon” as a philosophical device to capture the “power relationships” within classrooms; in other words, I intended to compare neither classrooms to actual prisons nor students to actual prisoners. My commitment to realizing dialogic classrooms should be evident partly in the later section of the article “Balancing the Use of Disciplinary Power and Students’ Spontaneity” (pp. 27-28) and another article of mine entitled *Realizing Dialogic EFL classrooms*, which appeared in *The Language Teacher* (Hanaki, 2007b).

It is unfortunate that arguably my true intention was misinterpreted by Holland, and possibly some other readers. This misunderstanding might have been caused by my “superficial” interpretation of Foucault, as Holland (p. X) describes it. On the other hand, however, I am more than fortunate in having this opportunity to further clarify my points and make some additional comments on my reflective article. Holland’s critical response certainly assisted me in refining my thoughts on this subject matter. In that sense, this published correspondence between Sarah Holland and myself might embody a form of dialogic learning, an ideal that perhaps both of us similarly envision.

References

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