Fieldwork to Formalism: A Silencing

Sometimes We Cause it; Sometimes it's Already There; Sadly, Though, it's Almost Always Present

I’m afraid it’s true. The “process of systematically studying a particular writing community, organization, or set of practices reduces complexity, consolidates innovation, and dilutes the agency of human and non-human actors” (Hart-Davidson on Spinuzzi. April 2007). But it’s not just studying these areas that causes this obstruction. Researchers encounter “fieldwork to formalism” on a regular basis. There are two main reasons for this—We cause it, but we also encounter it.

Marilyn Cooper says, “Theoretical models even as they situation new insights, blind us to some aspects of the phenomena we are studying.” The problem? First: It’s because we systematically study something. It’s what we do. We set out to study a particular writing community, or a set of practices. Then, when we systematically study, a couple of things happen. One, we encounter length requirements. We often must hone in on (and therefore omit) certain subject matter. Sometimes it’s deliberate (I’ll say based on “length.”) But, too, once we start studying something, and we write on it, we’ve surely left out something. Someone.

We can then only watch “fieldwork to formalism” reinforce itself and bury itself a little deeper. Reinscribe itself. Whether we study writing communities, an organization, or a set of work-place practices, as we choose where to hone in, we are leaving cultures out. …They leave out X; she leaves out Y; we leave out a race or a social class or a whole community. Each time we study something we make rhetorical moves that stifle someone somewhere. Each time we study something, someone is having their agency diluted and their complexity reduced.

Banks does this. He silences. Don’t misunderstand; Banks’ work is luminous, but it does exactly what he advocates against. It reduces complexity. It consolidates innovation. Banks dilutes the agency of the lower-class poor white folk. He dilutes the agency of the Native Americans. He’s not malicious, and he wanted race to be the apex of his argument, but nevertheless, he’s silenced several others. A brief mention of the poor or of Native Americans sprinkled throughout his work—a phrase every few pages—and he could have at least pointed his readers in the direction of the folks he silenced. Maybe his publicist gave him a word limit. Who knows. While brilliant and on-the-money with his theory, Banks’ systematic studying of African Americans and technology overlooks others. Banks’ central argument is centered on “what is at stake for African Americans with the Digital Divide” (xxi). Again on page 2, Banks says he is striving “to make a real difference in a nation whose existence depends on rigorous commitments to technological advancement and exclusions based on race.” But, this country of ours also implements these “rigorous commitments to technological advancement and exclusions based on” class. So,
when drawing implications for pedagogy or from a particular study, some researchers and theorists successfully avoid the whole issue of who is being reduced, consolidated, and/or diluted. And, silencing can happen sometimes whether a researcher or theorist is there to study or not. Often this silencing is already in place. JoAnn Yates’ text titled: “Control Through Communication,” shows us that even her title alludes to the control of someone.

And, to find people reducing complexity, consolidating innovation, and diluting the agency of others, we can look outside the walls of academe too. Who are our news anchors? Who’s our movie stars? Who are our Lawyers? Do the people in these positions help to reinforce the “fieldwork to formalism” syndrome? Yes. But, we can help one another avoid it. We must invite everyone to our conversations. It’s time to put away the good china and get the every-day conversation out on the table. Someone is writing these texts—these conversations—these studies. And, the conversation at hand isn’t particularly holistic. Any and all of these conversations—once in round-table format—could start to crumble thousands of years of reification of the greek tradition. The rich, white tradition. The “be seen and not heard” tradition. Banks’ agrees. Banks says he prefers not to

“submit to a theoretical orthodoxy that insists everything is a ‘social construction’ and therefore not based in fact and therefore untrue: an orthodoxy that leaves little room to socially or physically construct anything outside of the current order of White, western, social, political, economic, and technological domination” (4).

Do you wonder if places and people deal with this silence when creating a training manual study of workplace practice? Let us think of a workplace on broad-scale terms. Say we envision a workplace the size of a city. Say the city is the size of New Orleans. Let us think of the training manual in the plan to bring back New Orleans and the remainder of the Gulf. Have we seen a reduced complexity, consolidated innovation, or diluted agency represented in the media regarding the devastation of our Gulf Coast and all its peoples? Read this headline from npr:

Commentary
Saints in Superdome Signals New Orleans' Return
by Chris Rose

Morning Edition, September 25, 2006 · Monday Night Football will feature the New Orleans Saints and the Atlanta Falcons in the grand reopening of the Louisiana Superdome. The game will transform a structure that became notorious as a Hurricane Katrina shelter into an icon of the city's rebirth.
Superdome Reopens for Monday Night Football
by Molly Peterson and Mike Pesca

Day to Day · September 25, 2006 · On Monday night, the Superdome stadium in New Orleans will host its first football game since Hurricane Katrina, where more than one year ago thousands sought shelter from the storm and flooding; they were left stranded for days.

As victims of the storm packed into the Superdome, the image of the stadium became one of suffering, not celebration. Since then -- and after initial worries that the team would leave the area -- the Saints have played most of their games in either Baton Rouge, La., and San Antonio, Texas.

But Monday night, the Superdome reopens as the Saints host the Atlanta Falcons.

Both articles ran on NPR on the 25th of September 2006. Both articles are all about New Orleans. The first announces “Saints in Superdome Announces New Orleans’ Return.” NPR for godssake. The second articles lists “they were left stranded for days” as the only tie-back to the tragedy then or the allusion to the travesty now. You’d think NPR would at least remind the world of the thousands of victims still homeless. Nope. Radio Silence.

In late September, the Saints came home to the Superdome and the media went wild. New Orleans is Back! The Saints are Marchin’ … This Monday Night Football football game was hailed repeatedly in the media as The Healing Has Begun. NPR is certainly not the only one using a silencer, just possibly the most shocking one. While NFL fatcats sat watching the game and drinking beer in the Dome, many folks in that fair city didn’t even have a roof over their heads for the night. They had no homes. The skewed TV cameras and television announcers continue to limit that already-diluted agency facing the homeless of New Orleans. They silenced them.

Similarly, in April 2007, The New York Times creates a database for the fallen US soldiers in Iraq. This interactive set of graphs, photos, statistics, and Flash technology serves many facets. But, due to its black and white color-scheme, the agency of the folks of color (ones with light skin) can’t be distinguished from the white guy who died fighting for his country with his desert tan. While I’d never sell short anyone in our military, and I wish I could get them home today somehow, what the Times has done is reduce the agency of the folks with, yellow, tan, olive, and light brown skin. The black and white nature of the interface causes those of light color to “look white.” When they “look white,” the voice of their plight and their culture is diluted.
Yet, pedagogically at least, I believe I see a way to reverse this silencing – and a potential way to avoid furthering the silence – at least as baby steps. In a lecture and assessment plan by Nancy DeJoy, in April of 2007, DeJoy talked about assessment and how assessment for student work can help us assess our whole courses. We talked about talking about the grading process with our students. Opening this discussion, DeJoy avoids the "fieldwork to formalism," insomuch as she asks her students to have a class discussion which talks about the grading practices and presumptions of practices which they encountered in their high school years. Opening this conversation turns up the volume for the students (the community) voices in her classroom. Having this discussion—which could be construed a negotiation at times—gives some agency back to her students. This practice actually reverses the field to formalism which has been reinscribed in classrooms for over a hundred years. It’s a small step forward, but it is a step forward. Marilyn Cooper says: “[T]he perspective allowed by the dominant model has again become too confining.” Which means, we must build and merge new theories that triangulate data and allow for ways in which peoples become diluted—new theories like Hutong Sun’s Cultural Usability Theory, in which Sun looks at systems of technologies in their social contexts. Sun’s theory allows for a more holistic social view. Sun’s theory brings to bare a more holistic representation of the cultures involved in her study. It’s only when the underrepresented voices overpower those voices in power that we can reduce, and then eliminate Fieldwork-to-formalism. Sun’s theory includes some ways to see the unseen; it accounts for reductions in complexity, consolidations in innovation, and dilutions in agency. Her Cultural Usability Theory helps to alleviate at least some of the oppression – oh, I mean reduction, consolidation and dilution of those underrepresented voices. And, Marilyn Cooper seems to agree with Sun’s ideas:

“[A]ll the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the systems” (368). That said, we researchers and theorists choose to leave one voice out, that one voice is immediately diluted.

Spinuzzi’s research talks of workers’ workarounds and innovations, and how those workarounds and innovations are usurped by researchers’ systematic study of the workplace. That workaround and/or innovation is still the workers’ voice—it’s a part of their workplace practices. Yet, when that voice is usurped, it is silenced. Cooper agrees:

“Whenever ideas are seen as commodities they are not shared; whenever individual and group purposes cannot be negotiated someone is shut out; differences in status, or power, or intimacy curtain, interpersonal interactions; cultural institutions and attitudes discourage writing as often as they
encourage it; textual forms are just as easily used as barriers to discourse as they are as a means to discourse."

How can we all keep talking about this so that we break down these barriers? Only when we can all come to the table and start talking will this “field to formalism” begin to truly subside. We can no longer say “Oh, I wasn’t talking about them; I wanted to highlight these.” We must say, “Oh, I think you’re right! This is the same. Oh, we do need to mention these folks! A multitude of peoples are being underrepresented!”.

The cure? Well, the cure is to keep talking. In psychology it’s actually called “The Talking Cure.” So, taking small steps like Nancy DeJoy’s unpacking the grading schemes, and medium-size steps such as Sun’s look into the social contextual setting, bring to the forefront those voices that are usually “seen but not heard.” Their work brings the subaltern voices (if you will) to the front row -- so those voices can be heard too (Spivak, belle hooks). When these conversations are on the table, then we researchers can make a real difference; we can reduce these injustices brought about by the “process of systematically studying a particular writing community, organization, or set of practices [which] reduces complexity, consolidates innovation, and dilutes the agency of human and non-human actors”—at least in the places where we are conducting these systematic studies.
Works Cited

