

Teaching Educational Leadership in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract

In November of last year, the Oxford Dictionary announced that their word of the year for 2016 would be *Post-Truth*. Recent events in America, with the unexpected election of Donald Trump, in the UK, with its vote to leave the European Union, and in continental Europe with the rise of far-right political parties such as France's National Front, have given rise to new terms in popular culture and commentary to describe or explain these events. Terms such as *alternative facts*, *fake news*, and *post-truth* have entered everyday discourse at an astonishing level.

While serious examinations of the concept of *Post-Truth* have begun to appear in the literature and in courses and seminars at some universities, what has not been explored is its effect on educational leaders and on those who teach educational leadership. Indeed, as educators, what *post-truth* represents are things we do not want to see in our students or colleagues - intemperate behavior, a lack of interest in accuracy or facts, including making up one's own facts, and a willful and proud lack of intellectual curiosity; all being rewarded with power and influence. As teachers of educational leadership, our job is to encourage our students to be the most thoughtful, self-aware, insightful, and courageous leaders possible, while all around us those attributes are constantly and consistently being devalued.

This paper examines the implications of this so-called *post-truth* era on educational leaders and those that teach them. I address the charge leveled by some commentators that a

preoccupation with post-structural and postmodern thought in western faculties of education has made us unintentionally complicit in the rise of falsehoods being disguised as truth. And I explore ways that we can refute the misinformation that leads to inaccurate beliefs, and mitigate their consequences.

Teaching Educational Leadership in the Post-Truth Era

“Well, who you gonna believe – me, or your own eyes?” Chico Marx Duck Soup 1933

Introduction

The genesis of this paper arose in mid-April of this year while I was teaching an online post-graduate course to students of educational leadership and administration. All of these students either were, or aspired to be, educational leaders. All of them worked in the education sector as teachers or administrators in Canada, China, and Vietnam. And all of them could point to various situations where they had encountered occurrences of strongly held false beliefs among students, parents, or colleagues. I had recently begun research on a different study, but immediately laid it aside and started to explore this topic after one of the students asked what one ought to do in a situation where a “staff [member] had greatly disturbed another team member when discussing Trump policies and the likelihood of a nuclear war...and the ultimate destruction of the world within a year (female student A, personal communication April 23, 2017).” The resultant class discussion revealed that although disturbing behaviour based on intolerance and false beliefs has always been present, “in talking with other teachers and my coworkers [it] is significantly worse this year than it has been in the past (female student B, personal communication April 23, 2017).”

I began to consider, as I led and participated in these discussions, how to teach potential educational leaders to respond or react to the current abundance of misinformation and what it means, either as teachers or administrators, in how they will do their jobs. I thought of the competencies educational leaders require and wondered if we were doing a good enough job of preparing potential leaders to achieve those competencies and adapt them for the post-truth environment.

Post-Truth defined

When the Oxford Dictionary identified Post-Truth as their word of the year for 2016, its authors define the concept as an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016). The authors note that the context in which the concept of post-truth is most prevalent is that of politics, particularly in relation to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom in 2016 and the US presidential election of 2016. They also point out that the prefix ‘post’ in the compound word has taken on a newer meaning from its previous usage as referring to a time after a specific event or situation (e.g. post-war), to mean that the concept referred to has become “unimportant or irrelevant”, implying “that the truth itself has become irrelevant” (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2016) For non-native speakers of English, this distinction is important since upon first seeing the word it can be interpreted as meaning ‘after the truth is known.’

Alongside the term *Post-Truth*, related and often synonymous terms have also arisen, including *Alternative Facts* and *Fake News*. The term *Alternative Facts* was coined by Donald Trump’s associate, Kellyanne Conway, while defending exaggerated claims about the size of the crowd at Trump’s inauguration in January 2017. *Fake News* on the other hand, describes intentionally false news stories disguised as fact, mainly originating on the internet, and spread primarily through social media. The term itself has a murky history, but it rose to worldwide prominence during the 2016 US presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). More recently the term has been co-opted by some politicians to refer to any news stories they disagree with.

Implications for teachers of Education Management

The prevalence of misinformation, factual inaccuracies, and lies in public discourse is important to teachers, educational leaders, and those who prepare them for practice. What we are witnessing in the public sphere, especially from persons in leadership positions, are a lot

of things we would not want to see in our students or colleagues -- intemperate behaviour, a lack of interest in truth or facts, and a willful and proud lack of curiosity; all being rewarded with power and influence. As a teacher of educational leadership, I find it interesting that my job is to try to encourage people to be the most thoughtful, self-aware, insightful, and courageous leaders possible, while all around us those attributes are constantly and consistently devalued. Although serious examinations of the concept of Post-Truth have begun to appear in the literature, and in courses and seminars at some universities (c.f. Athabasca University, 2017; Koroma, 2017; Vancouver Island University, 2017), what has not been explored is its effect on educational leaders and on those who teach educational leadership. The educational leader is expected to shape the vision and direction for academic success in a school, to set the climate for learning and teaching, and to empower others to lead and make significant educational decisions. In order to achieve these goals, the leader requires the skills to navigate the onslaught of misinformation assaulting learners and mitigate its effects on students and others.

Alcott and Gentzcow (2017) assert that there is a positive correlation between increased levels of education and the ability to discern misinformation and counter-argue against false assertions. Education, they contend, develops “cognitive abilities that better equip citizens to make informed...decisions” (p. 228). It has long been argued that one of the social returns of education is a critically informed citizenry. Indeed, social scientists point to Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) as providing one of the earliest examples of this social benefit of education: “The state derives no inconsiderable advantage from the education of the common people. If instructed they... are less liable to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders (Book V, Chapter I, Part III).”

Functionalism, social reproduction, critical educational theory, and symbolic interaction theory all, in their various ways, ascribe to education a vital role in equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills important to maintaining the functions of society (Parsons, 1959; Davies, 1994; Apple, 1996; Burgess, 1995). Although there is considerable disagreement among them on how education ought to contribute to society's purposes, and what that society ought to look like, they all point to the essential nature of education to ensure an informed and thoughtful public.

Despite these assertions, recent research suggests that, in the present age, students are less able to distinguish between facts and falsehoods on questions of public policy and leadership. Our prevailing perception is that, since young people are very skilled at using various social media platforms, they ought to be equally adept at discerning the veracity of what they encounter there. Researchers at the Stanford University Graduate School of Education spent sixteen months between January 2015 and June 2016 surveying 7804 students in secondary schools and universities throughout the United States to evaluate "the ability to judge the credibility of information that floods young people's smartphones, tablets, and computers." (Stanford History Education Group, 2016. p. 3). The study found that the vast majority of students were unable to apply critical thinking skills in their consumption of information on the internet. Many students were unable to distinguish between advertisements and news stories. Many others could not tell that the source of a particular story was a political action committee, even though it was listed as such. And still more did not critically question any of the information they encountered. "Overall, young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak" (p. 4).

While these results are somewhat disturbing, and do point to the existence of a well-developed, ready-made audience for fake news and post-truth assertions, what do we, as

educational leaders and professors of education, now do to correct this phenomenon? Are we in some way culpable? Have we, in our preparation of teachers and educational leaders, been complicit in creating the conditions for the uncritical consumption of spurious propaganda and specious truth claims? The next section will attempt to address some of these concerns.

Postmodernism and its relationship with Post-Truth

Faculties of Education, at least the several with which I have had experience, have been preoccupied with postmodern philosophy since its emergence as a separate academic discipline in the mid-1980s. As a foundation upon which to base studies of curriculum and educational leadership, postmodernism has, ironically, been attractive mainly because of the fragmented and diverse points of view of many of its adherents. Writing about the prevalence of postmodernism in educational administration, Foster (1998) reflects this paradox: “Here is a term that has entered the discourse of administration and about which nobody is terribly clear” (p. 294). Moreover, this lack of clarity, being one of the defining features of the postmodern world (Krugly-Smolksi, 1997), has necessitated the adoption of a new approach to education studies (Ryan & Drake, 1992). They point to conditions such as persistent technological evolution, a compression of time and space with regard to communication, universal accessibility to knowledge, the increasing assertion of disadvantaged groups, and the questioning of the legitimacy of previously universal truths which have led to the undermining of consistency in the world and have resulted in what has been termed the postmodern condition (Watson, 1998; Ryan & Drake, 1992).

Capper (1995), Furman (1998), and Scheurich (1995) propose that educational administration and leadership studies can be learned much from postmodern perspectives and can be applied in

many of them to the knowledge base, as well as to practice in the field. Notions such as the rejection of a search for universal truths, or the rejection of binary oppositions in language, can help reduce unintentionally gender-biased or race-biased inquiry by paying attention to the unique cultural, ethnic, or gender experiences of individuals, not generalizations of groups.

Despite the optimism that scholars of educational leadership identified in postmodernism, critics of the philosophy have come to attribute it with the rise of post-truth. Dennett (2017) states emphatically: “Sometimes, views can have terrifying consequences that might actually come true. I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. You'd have people going around saying: ‘Well, you're part of that crowd who still believe in facts’” (Dennett cited in Cadwalladr, 2017). Less unforgiving but still critical, Grayling (2017) identifies post-modernism and relativism as the intellectual roots “lurking in the background” of post-truth. “[postmodernists say] everything is relative. Stories are being made up all the time - there is no such thing as the truth. You can see how that has filtered its way indirectly into post-truth.’ He says this has unintentionally ‘opened the door’ to a type of politics untroubled by evidence (Grayling, cited in Coughlin, 2017).”

Despite their well-expressed contentions, these commentators appear to ignore the historical record in favour of hyperbole. Misleading and spurious forms of news and information, and those that have believed and acted upon them, existed long before the postmodernists came along. Moreover, what the postmodern philosophers were questioning was not simply *truth*, but those who decided what was true or not. It may be that the postmodernists were not so much the cause of the rise of post-truth as they were canaries in the coalmine, warning us to be aware of who or what controls the agenda and what ‘they’ want us to know or believe. Rather than postmodernism being part of the problem, its

fondness for looking at truth narratives in new ways may be part of the solution. Far from being part of a “culture war between those who believe only they know the truth and those who believe it can never be known”, they encourage us to examine different versions of what passes for truth and make informed decisions based on rational thought (Fernandez-Armesto, 1997, p xi).

Impact of Post-Truth on Educational Leadership

As educational leaders and those who prepare them, how do we teach prospective principals, school heads, and university deans and directors ways to navigate these potential hazards present in their schools? When opinions are passed as evidence how do we ensure that when we teach scientific method to high schoolers it is understood and absorbed? For instance, our own libraries no longer have card catalogues; we instead give students options to search far beyond the limits of what many of us encountered when researching an essay or studying for an exam. Accordingly, as Kahne and Bowyer (2017) point out:

Changes in the media environment such as the diminished role of gatekeepers and vastly expanded opportunities for circulation of both information and misinformation in the Digital Age make exposure to inaccurate information both more common and more difficult to detect...the role of schools in promoting the capacity and commitment to use and identify accurate information will be ever more important (p.4).

Bearing in mind that, the Stanford History Education Group (2016) found that students in college and university, as well as students from the K-12 system, were unable to distinguish between factual and specious information, this is significant for educational leaders at all levels, not just for school principals.

To this end, it is important to understand what is expected of educational leaders, then undertake to determine how best to prepare prospective leaders so that they are able to create and maintain a learning environment where objective facts override post-truth.

It is generally accepted in the field that educational leaders are responsible for creating a vision for the success of all students and an organizational climate in which it can happen. Beyond that, and in order to turn vision and climate into action, leaders are responsible for developing leadership across the organization, working to improve instruction, and managing the people and processes in their institutions (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). However, when students and teachers enter a school community they arrive pre-formed with an abundance of information and received knowledge; some of it accurate and realistic, and some of it incorrect and fraudulent. Family, friends, and a plethora of media sources of varying veracity exert an immense influence on what individuals accept as true. For example, Harmon (2017), investigating climate change denial among secondary school students in the US State of Ohio, discovers that mistaken convictions informed by family economics and a great deal of media misinformation is very difficult to dislodge: “What people ‘believe’ about global warming doesn’t reflect what they know...it expresses who they are (Kahan, cited in Harmon, 2017).” As a consequence, educational leaders face a mammoth task to realize their above-mentioned responsibilities.

All of this provides a unique challenge for educational leaders and those who teach them. What we teach, and the way we teach it, is what will help educational leaders challenge post truth among students and colleagues. Contemporary conceptions of educational leadership tend to focus on the competencies that leaders ought to exhibit on the job. Although different systems may use different terminology to describe them, when we teach prospective leaders and provide professional development to existing leaders, we focus on the following core areas: (a) instructional leadership, (b) relational leadership, namely the culture and relationships that support student (and adult) development, engagement, and learning, and (c) organizational leadership, including management & administration, and community-building; all of which are overarched by (d) ethics and the moral purpose of education

(BCPVPA, 2015; SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2016). Of course, each of these core competencies is made up of a series of more specific competencies that focus on the leader's actual day-to-day practice.

In normal circumstances, the leadership competencies themselves would be enough to create and foster an environment of authenticity and evidence-based behaviour. Any educational leader possessing these attributes should have no trouble reaching teachers and students and maintaining an atmosphere free of misinformation, factual inaccuracies, and outright lies. Unfortunately, once post-truth takes hold it is incredibly tenacious. Very often when individuals are challenged in their false beliefs and given opposing evidence, their beliefs get stronger (McRaney, cited in Silverman, 2011). This 'backfire effect' is well-documented in the literature. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) suggest that efforts to discredit inaccurate information can leave people more convinced that the misinformation is true than they would have been otherwise. They also assert that the backfire effect appears to be more prevalent when the false information helps reinforce a favoured worldview or ideology. For the educational leader, the backfire effect is particularly troublesome. Schools and other educational institutions are intended to cultivate the social, academic, cultural and intellectual development of students. Those students, or teachers, who arrive in school with well-established but wholly inaccurate beliefs and worldviews, will be much more stubborn and resistant to having their worldviews challenged.

Therefore, it is important that when we are preparing leaders we ensure that they do their best to mitigate this effect. In addition to teaching leadership competencies we have to teach them to be mindful of the effort required to counter erroneous beliefs, or to prevent them from taking hold in the first place. Simply asking educational leaders to encourage critical thinking in classrooms is not enough. We must make a determined effort to teach

them how to engage individuals and motivate them toward thinking critically about their own beliefs and worldviews.

It is by engaging with these skeptical minds and teaching them to think critically that we can challenge students to reflect upon their beliefs and articulate how they have come to hold them. Very often these fabricated beliefs, while well established, are not well formulated and do not stand up to an evidence based self-analysis. The continued and expanded application of a constructivist approach to both teacher education and leadership preparation is suggested because, as part of the constructivist learning experience, learners are forced to think about reflecting upon their experiences and beliefs (Tatto, 1998). When we teach leaders to assist teachers to unstructure student' lives, not merely teaching from test to test, and goal to goal, but teaching them how to navigate all potential goals and obstacles; students will begin to discover the mismatch between post-truth assertions and those constructed from evidence based reasoning. Teaching students how to think rather than what to think, and using evidence and logic to dismantle truth claims from all sources, will assist educational leaders in performing their difficult jobs. Indeed, educational leaders can encourage the use of such strategies in all subject areas, as the following example from the humanities affirms:

Good historical writing can be an antidote to 'post-truth' culture – not because historians have magically resolved the epistemological challenges of generations but because they have a pragmatic, practical answer. On the one hand, historians are professionally dedicated to questioning received narratives, never taking them at face value; on the other, they are equally determined to use an exhaustive search for evidence to construct the most plausible meaning they can. Reading and doing history is empowering because it does not just give you the tools to doubt what you're told, but also the tools to build a case to back up anything that is doubted (A.I.P. Smith, 2017, p. 17).

In this paper I have attempted to present some implications arising from post-truth and its associated semblances on educational leaders and those that teach them. I explored postmodern philosophy as it is applied in administration, and addressed the charge that postmodern thought is complicit in the rise of post-truth. Finally, I examined the role of educational leaders and how those of us that prepare them for practice can provide them with some tools to overcome the effects of this cultural malady in their institutions or schools.

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