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### A Review of "Michel Foucault"

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## Book Reviews



Fendler, L. (2010). *Michel Foucault*. London, UK, and New York, NY: Continuum. 235 pp.

To corral the ideas, influences, and biography of one of the most important 20th-century thinkers is difficult, but to do so with Michel Foucault (1926–1984), a man who wrote to have no face, is especially dubious. Lynn Fendler, a respected scholar in the fields of education and Foucault studies, presents a Foucault that is an original thinker, a fearless interlocutor, and an astute scholar. A danger with writing a primer is that his ideas either will become too sanitized to the point of clichés or become too detailed so that his ideas become too obscure and not useful. Fendler provides a thoughtful and copious review of Foucault’s influences and offers important insights into his ideas and their application to education.

The book is organized into four parts. In “Part 1: Intellectual Biography” she reviews the major influences on Foucault’s thinking and provides some details about his personal life. Fendler appropriately begins this section with a quote from Foucault about learning where he argues that for a teacher to present learning as dull is more of a challenge than as a pleasurable endeavor. She uses this quote to argue that Foucault was a provocative thinker, who problematized present taken-for-granted ideas and practices, and who wrote poetically. Fendler returns to these themes often as they guide and structure the book. Additionally, in this section she summarizes major thinkers (e.g., Marx, Frankfurt School, Satre) and intellectual movements (e.g., Phenomenology, Structuralism, Post-structuralism) during Foucault’s life, explicating each one precisely in relation to Foucault. For example, she shows how the criticism of Foucault as a nihilist is possible, but unfounded. Foucault, she asserts, does not claim that there is no truth, but is interested instead in the rules that govern specific truths. Fendler argues that Foucault was not necessarily interested in such dichotomous relationships, but problematized reason itself and the various rationalities used to justify or legitimate specific practices. Fendler maneuvers through the nuances of every philosophical school fluidly. More important, however,

is that she is able to negotiate the gray areas in Foucault’s philosophy. She does not offer a Cliffs Notes version of Foucault’s ideas, shying away from Foucault’s complex thought and methodology. This section is an excellent summary of the major movements in the 20th century, and sets the stage for the rest of the book. New readers to Foucault will certainly need to read this section before moving on to the other ones. Avid readers of Foucault can use this section as a refresher.

“Part II: Critical Exposition of Foucault’s Work,” which includes “Definitions of Major Concepts” (Chapter 2) and “Summaries of Major Works” (Chapter 3), is a tour de force review of Foucault’s ideas and his books, interviews, and essays. In this section Fendler does not review every interview or essay, but does summarize his major books and provides a nice selection from his interviews and essays. Of interest is her explication of the major themes. To explain the term *discourse*, for example, she uses the analogy of the Internet. This real-world example clarifies a sometimes complex, yet overused word. Furthermore, Fendler explains that for Foucault, histories cannot be objective, but instead are riddled with selection bias because historical events are completely unknowable and incomplete. Fendler restores chance to Foucault’s historical methodology. Finally, she makes it very clear that resistance and power occur simultaneously, and that resistance is often excluded from analyses of power. Resistance is vital to freedom. The time she takes on Foucault’s three books on the history of sexuality is refreshing. She illustrates how quite a bit of work could be done using Foucault’s care of the self.

In “Part III: The Reception and Influence of Foucault’s Work” (“Chapter 4: The Prolific Writer and Thinker”) Fendler reiterates Foucault’s alternative approaches to philosophy and how he challenged prevailing philosophical schools of his time at the beginning of this section. She maintains this thread; describes briefly his reception in the English, French, and German speaking worlds; provides a brief biography of the major interlocutors of his time; and summarizes Foucault’s main arguments against each one. Philosophers she covers include Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Jürgen Habermas, Paul Rabinow, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, Noam Chomsky, Ian Hacking, and Nancy Fraser. Her explanation of pragmatism, her discussion of the famous Foucault–Chomsky televised debate, and her brief review of Hacking’s relationship with Foucault are of interest in this section. Fendler transitions from interlocutors to his influence on specific fields, such as history, education, feminism, and queer theory. Although she has a handle on the differences between Foucault and other thinkers of the time, she falters a bit in describing his influence on specific fields. Granted, each one could be a book of their own, but she omits important ideas and influences of each field.

“Part IV: The Relevance of Foucault’s Work Today” is the most compelling section of the book. Here, Fendler lays out the important questions and ideas that Foucault’s work can address in the field of education. An implicit argument in this book is that Foucault was a teacher who left us, his students, with a collection of tools to examine and reexamine present taken-for-granted thoughts and practices. As a good student, Fendler ties previous sections of the book to specific areas within education. Fendler’s scholarship shines in this section as she demonstrates how Foucault’s ideas can be useful in the field of education.

This book is overall a useful resource for both new and advanced readers of Foucault, yet some important gaps need attention. The exclusion of Martin Heidegger as an important influence on Foucault’s work is puzzling. It perpetuates the notion that Nietzsche was Foucault’s primary influence, even though Foucault stated that both philosophers gave him the philosophical shock that shaped his work.

Additionally, the section on queer theory is light. Several scholars in the field of education have used Foucault in their research. Several scholars in queer studies in education, more than Fendler recognizes, have illustrated the damaging affects of homonormative discourses and rigid sexual and gender identities. Foucault has been a greater influence on queer studies in education than for which Fendler gives him credit and scholars have used his ideas in profound ways. More important, Fendler neglects to mention Foucault’s main point about homosexuality. As he states in “Sexual Choice/Sexual Act” and as several scholars in education have understood, the real fear of homosexuality is not necessarily the sexual act itself, but that homosexuals could have meaningful and fulfilling relationships with others and with oneself beyond prescribed or normalized ones. Homosexuality is not simply an identity, but is rather an ontological stance that allows for the possibility of new relationships to form.

Finally, more space needed to be dedicated to scholars in education who have written book-length studies using Foucault’s genealogical method. Although these books utilize other theorists, the primary influence on the work is Foucault. An examination of each book in relation to the earlier sections of Fendler’s book would provide needed guidance on how to use Foucault’s historical methodology.

In the end, Fendler accumulates a copious amount of information into one book. She never loses command of the material and in fact presents it in a reader-friendly manner. As an incomplete primer, Fendler acknowledges that this book represents more of her reading of Foucault than an objective reading of his ideas. She is able to address the whys and hows of Foucault in educational studies without falling into the trap of instrumentalism. Similar to Foucault, she leaves the doing up to the reader. There is, clearly, more to be said about and done with Foucault, and if there was ever a book that demonstrated this point, it would be this one.

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Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (2010). *Demystifying Professional Learning Communities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education. 166 pp.

Successful schools promote positive student learning outcomes, particularly for traditionally marginalized students. Hipp and Huffman unpack professional learning communities as a necessary factor in growing and sustaining such schools. Building from the premise that a professional learning community (PLC) provides “infrastructures that build individual, interpersonal, and organizational capacity” (p. 4), they seek to “clearly define an approach to school improvement that uses PLC practice to achieve success for every student” (p. 7).

The first three chapters form an opening section. After setting the context in the introductory chapter, Hipp and Huffman draw from a review of literature (Hord, 1997) to describe five dimensions of PLCs (Chapter 2): (a) supportive and shared leadership, (b) shared values and vision, (c) collective learning and application, (d) shared personal practice, and (e) supportive conditions. They assert that cultivating PLCs entails coordinated, schoolwide efforts based on these five dimensions, and this theme serves as the backbone for the text. In Chapter 3 they briefly describe the methodology and conceptual framework guiding two bodies of empirical research on schools at various stages of initiating, implementing, and sustaining PLCs. Data from this research are woven throughout.

Chapters 4–6 form a second section. It builds on the first by describing specific tools and processes for analyzing PLCs. Here, the authors do well to caution readers against essentializing the notion: “Rather than determining that a school is or is not functioning as a PLC, it is more useful to assess its progress along a continuum by analyzing specific school and classroom practices” (p. 29). Chapter 4 effectively illustrates how two surveys—the revised edition of the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* and a version of the *Teacher Efficacy Beliefs Scale*—provide vital data about present conditions in a school. In Chapter 6 they detail a specific process for critically analyzing and improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment amongst teachers. These two chapters provide pragmatic guidance for educational leaders pursuing PLCs. The array of informal instruments described in Chapter 5, though less applicable for practitioners, nevertheless offer insight into indicators of how PLCs are developmental in nature.

The authors strive to further demystify PLCs via three case studies presented in Chapters 7–10. Drawing on longitudinal data, these case studies show how PLCs function in actual schools confronting their own challenges. For instance, over a decade Lake Elementary School (Chapter 8) experienced a dramatic rise in the number of students with special needs, from 6.6% to 21% (p. 76). Teachers attributed growth in