A number of theorists and scholars have proclaimed that we now live in a postmodern world—a world better explained by theories and concepts different from those of the modern world dating from the Enlightenment and before. The theories and concepts of postmodernism are widely and prominently applied in adult education. So, how do postmodernists characterize postmodernism? What are the critics' critiques? Do proponents and critics agree on anything?

Characterizing Postmodernism

Discussing postmodernism and continuing education, Leicester (2000) writes that “postmodernism is not a systematic theory or unified movement so much as a loose umbrella term for a perspective” incorporating reactions against “the sovereignty of science, the dominance of ‘western traditions’ and the assumption of epistemological progress” (p. 73). However, some key features “overlap and criss-cross, appear and disappear in discussions about ‘postmodernism’” (ibid., p. 74):

- **Plurality of Perspectives.** Multiple perspectives, accounts, and theories are respected. Eclectic thinking, drawing on and synthesizing multiple cultural traditions is encouraged.

- **Antiessentialism.** A text (be it an individual word, a message, a concept, or any significant structure) has no inherent, essential meaning—no “one thing in common that makes us use the same word and which would give us the essence of the concept” (ibid., p. 74); rather, it is open to multiple interpretations.

- **Antifoundationalism.** Truth and knowledge of it are not based on a fixed foundation of objective reality. Instead, truths are located in specific sociocultural contexts, outside of which no vantage point exists.

- **Antiscientism.** In particular, science is rejected as a foundation; the positivist assumptions that science is uniquely objective and value neutral are considered a language game.

- **End of Metaphysics and Ideology.** Antifoundationalism represents the end of metaphysics; if there are no fixed foundations of objective reality for truth and knowledge, there is no longer a concern with the fundamental nature of reality and with the limits and validity of our knowledge about it. Likewise, ideology is at an end—no more “grand narratives” to legitimate and provide a correct interpretation of a wide range of events.

Others focus particularly on the discrediting of modernism’s grand narrative, the positivist assumption that objectivity is the only truth, that all questions could be answered by a hierarchy of sciences, principles, and beliefs: “Knowledge was equated with science and science was reality” is the summation found in a postmodern perspective on evidence-based nursing (Marks-Maran 1999, p. 4). That grand narrative was discredited in the 1970s and 1980s, according to a postmodern perspective on home economics history, when society discovered that problems like war, poverty, violence, and drug abuse could be neither explained nor solved by science with its rigid controls, sequential problem solving, and predictable results (Richards 2000).

Critical theorists view knowledge as the outcome of human interests. Hegemonic truth claims (claims to know that are accepted as common sense) are subject to challenge when they perpetuate…a “maldistribution” of power. Power, from the critical perspective, is possessed by individuals and groups and exerted upon others through oppressive truth claims. Learning, then, is a process of challenging truth claims and arriving at a critical consciousness that these are not universal truths but claims that serve the interests of some at the expense of others.

Postmodern theorists view knowledge as tentative, multifaceted, and not necessarily rationally connected to any motivation or interest. Truth claims are always subject to challenge, and knowledge is always kept in play rather than concluding on a particular emancipatory note. Knowledge is an expression of power, which is ever-present but not omnipotent. Learning is a process of continuous deconstruction of knowledge, of playing with contradictions, and of creatively and productively opening the discourse of a field to an eclectic mosaic of many truths. (pp. 59-60)

Critiquing Postmodernism

The merits of postmodernist thought are hotly debated. Some find a self-defeating paradox in the key features of postmodernism. Some disagree with postmodernist views on objective reality and on our ability to know that reality accurately. Others question the quality of some postmodern writing and thought.

A Self-defeating Paradox

To some, the antifoundationalist claims of postmodern thought do not stand scrutiny. “We are faced with some curious and troubling paradoxes: the claims that there is no truth and that there are no self-evident facts have become truths that we take to be self-evident. The theory that no human theories can accurately match reality is taken by many to be a perfect match with reality. The claim that competing claims are incomensurable is regarded hands-down as superior to any competing claim” (Bachelder 1997, p. 4). Bredo (1997), a teacher educator commenting on recent trends in educational thinking, questions those who—

reach conclusions such as: “All generalization is impossible,” or “All knowledge is subjective,” or “I’m against all categorization,” or “We should be against all norms” or “We should not reach definite conclusions.” The paradoxical and self-defeating nature of these assertions sometimes escapes the ardent post-modernist’s attention. The more thoughtful post-modernist recognizes that his or her own discourse is paradoxical. It is self-disruptive even as it is disruptive of others. This is a good insight, but it seems to lead to self-defeating behavior, to self-erasure, and to a certain lack of seriousness, because adopting a serious attitude while recognizing that the stance is paradoxical is even more absurd. (p. 10)

Knowing Objective Reality

Many reject out of hand the postmodernist denial of objective reality; a physicist invites those who deny the objective existence of gravity to walk off the balcony of his 21st-floor apartment (Sokal and Bricmont 1998). Equally, many affirm that although various
factors affect how we come to know objective reality, we can in fact know it. For example, Chase (2000) advocates some postmodern perspectives in teaching history to adults but calls a widely quoted postmodernist assertion that the Gulf War did not take place “an example of postmodernism’s fury of negation…We can readily
go to the evidence of the Gulf War and conclude that the Gulf War did not take place” (p. 103). Likewise, “a realist readily grants that
all knowledge is constructed, but she is anxious to add that some
constructed knowledge is false (for example, the idea that race
is a biological category, or that some races are innately superior); while some constructed knowledge is true or at least partially true” (Bachelder 1997, p. 10).

Quality of Writing and Thought
In advocating a postmodern critique of scholarly inquiry, Mourad
(1997) describes postmodern thought as often highly and needlessly
nuanced, elliptical, and difficult to understand. Usher, Bryant, and
Johnston (1997) acknowledge that “density of expression and the
highly intellectual treatment of the subject-matter did create prob-
lems of reader accessibility” in an earlier text “that was meant to
require interpretive efforts and close reading” and that “there is a
certain incoherence in the quest for a text that empowers but which at
the same time disempowers through its inaccessibility” (pp. viii-
ix). Thomas (1997) notes that postmodern writers commenting on
education rarely explain their use of existing words with new or
obscure meanings or of novel metaphors. Finding it sad that “a great
deal of postmodernist writing about education does not make easy
reading…because it limits the dissemination of worthy postmodern
ideas and may distort the way people perceive postmodernist pro-
posals” (n.p.), he provides a glossary.

Less sympathetically, Chase (2000) draws a clear distinction between
the objective reality of the facts of history and more subjective inter-
pretations—grand narratives—of those facts; he points out that
“no serious historian, certainly none since World War I, believes
that history is a grand narrative of progress…Historians’ sequenc-
ing of selected changes as progress is fraught with difficulties: criti-
cal appreciation that this is so long predicated postmodernism” (p.
103). And with no sympathy at all, Sokal and Bricmont (1998) char-
acterize postmodernist “abuse” of the natural sciences as “(1) hold-
ning forth at length on scientific theories about which one has, at
best, an exceedingly hazy idea…(2) importing concepts from the
natural sciences into the humanities or social sciences without giv-
ing the slightest conceptual or empirical justification…(3) display-
ing a superficial erudition by shamelessly throwing around technical
terms in a context where they are completely irrelevant…[and] (4)
manipulating phrases and sentences that are meaningless” (pp. 4-
5).

A Middle Ground
At the same time that proponents and critics disagree vehemently
over epistemology, many agree that postmodernism brings a valu-
able spotlight on human nature and its role in constructing knowl-
ledge. Tisdell (1998), an adult educator, tells an illuminating postmodernist story about how her own positional-ness—her white-
ness—informed her view of what was valid or relevant knowledge,
to the detriment of an adult black student. Bachelder (1997) finds
merit in postmodernism, even though with a modernist caveat:
“Postmodernism has given us valuable insights that no inquiry is
able to the detriment of an adult black student. Bachelder (1997) finds
ness—informed her view of what was valid or relevant knowledge,
postmodernist story about how her own positionality—her white-
manipulating phrases and sentences that are meaningless” (pp. 4-
and collective voices.

References
Bachelder, C. “Toward a Coherent Antifoundational Practice.” Pa-
per presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on Col-
ge, 1997. (ED 410 556)
Bredo, E. “Passivity and Powerlessness in Educational Thought.” Pa-
er presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educa-
(ED 409 645)
Chase, M. “Stories We Tell Them: Teaching Adults History in the
Postmodern World.” Studies in the Education of Adults 32, no. 1
Hollinger, R. Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: A Thematic
Approach. Contemporary Social Theory, vol. 4. Thousand Oaks,
Kilgore, D. W. “Critical and Postmodern Perspectives on Adult Learn-
ing.” New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education no.
89 (Spring 2001): 53-61.
Leicester, M. “Post-postmodernism and Continuing Education.” In-
ternational Journal of Lifelong Education 19, no. 1 (January-
Marks-Maran, D. “Reconstructing Nursing: Evidence, Artistry and
the Curriculum.” Nurse Education Today 19, no. 1 (January
Mourad, R. P., Jr. Postmodern Philosophical Critique and the Pur-
Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1997.
Richards, M. V. “The Postmodern Perspective on Home Economics
History.” Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences 92, no. 1
Sokal, A., and Bricmont, J. Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern In-
Stufflebeam, D. L. “Conflicts between Standards-Based and Postmodernist Evaluations: Toward Rapprochement.” Journal of
Personnel Evaluation in Education 12, no. 3 (September 1998):
287-296.
(ED 410 577)
Tisdell, E. “Poststructural Feminist Pedagogies: The Possibilities and
Limitations of Feminist Emancipatory Adult Learning Theory
and Practice.” Adult Education Quarterly 48, no. 3 (Spring 1998):
139-156.
Usher, R.; Bryant, I.; and Johnston, R. Adult Education and the
Postmodern Challenge: Learning beyond the Limits. New York:

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from
the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The
content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies
of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names,
commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Gov-
ernment. Myths and Realities may be freely reproduced and are available at
http://ericacve.org/fulltext.asp>.