

It's About Learning and Teaching¹



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The quality of research in the history of education which is being completed in Australasia today is vastly superior in its interrogative and technical skills to what it was when I was first a student of the subject some forty plus years ago. Yet all does not seem to be well. Indeed, it used to be the case that historians of education led the way in wringing their hands because students, bureaucrats, and other powerful stakeholders in education did not appreciate the value of their work. Now, however, there is a strong sense that the whole academic field which embraces the study of education is being set aside by policies which denote learning and teaching to be activities that can be endlessly shaped, limited and credentialled by bureaucratic fiat. In response, the thesis I wish to advance is that this is not a policy trend which we can afford to ignore by chasing instead the hobbyhorses of our own scholarly enthusiasms. Rather, we must focus our research orientation so that we contest vigorously the abysmally simplistic assumptions about learning and teaching which are embedded in the dogmas of quantified 'outcomes' decreed by some authority which lies outside the classroom interaction process. Furthermore, and most importantly, I wish to argue that our task will be lightened to the extent that we learn to work with our colleagues in the study of education—philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and practitioners—rather than in isolation from them.

The pervasive strength of the contemporary link which is drawn between measured outcomes (for example, external testing; the construction of league tables) and the quality of classroom instruction lies in its apparent plausibility. In a world where education is a high cost public budget item and where electorates are constantly fed the misleading message that investment in schooling produces a direct return to individual and collective well-being, it is hardly surprising that governments are readily persuaded that value for money can be accounted for in terms of how well schools demonstrate their achievements as cashed out in results—be these results in the form of standardised tests, competitive examinations, or inspection reports. The good schools and teachers will be those with high results and they will be properly rewarded

in the public domain. The bad schools will be those with poor results and they and their teachers will be punished by whatever means a particular system chooses to devise. Nothing, it seems could be fairer than that but, as historians and other commentators know only too well, nothing in fact could be more inimical to the promotion of quality learning and teaching in the classrooms. Briefly put, a system of accountability which facilitates fear among most of the parties concerned, is a system which also lends itself to providing a series of tightly prescribed syllabus tasks in order to ensure 'fair rules of contest'. In this context it quickly becomes the result which captures attention rather than the learning and teaching experience which produces the result. This then is taken to signify achievement in understanding and in using knowledge as an instrument of intelligent action; a claim which may or may not be true. The gap that occurs here between the shadow and the reality has long been a matter of comment. In 1911, for example, the then recently retired Chief Inspector of Elementary Schools in England and Wales confessed,

Timetables, schemes of work, syllabuses, record books, progress books, examination result books and the rest—hours and hours are spent by teachers on the clerical work which these mechanical contrivances demand. And the hours spent are often wholly wasted. The worst of this machinery is that, so long as it works smoothly, all who are interested in the school are satisfied. But it may all work with perfect smoothness and yet achieve nothing that really counts.²

The pity of it is that his warning seems to have been lost on post-Thatcher Britain.

We should also acknowledge, however, that some of those whose names reside in our hall of education saints have fallen into the same trap. No-one doubts their liberal intentions but it is clear that these were undermined by their desire to produce the schooling outcomes which they had promised. Thus in 1632 Bishop J. A. Comenius in his notable magnum opus *The Great Didactic* endeavoured to realise his dream of universal schooling by setting out a recipe for providing '... the whole art of teaching all things to all men and indeed of teaching them with *certainty so that the result cannot fail to follow*'.³ What he devised in fact was a carefully controlled system of classroom instruction based upon a series of graded text-books in the several subjects. This was indeed a marked advance on existing chaotic practice but it does not take much imagination to grasp how dull and passive the learning in Comenian classrooms might have become. On the other hand, had he been writing today, Comenius' promise of certainly of outcome would have been likely to have attracted substantial research funding. Politicians, like many other

commentators, are ever tempted by offers of magic bullet solutions to educational dilemmas.

The 18th Century Swiss educationist, Heinrich Pestalozzi, was another theorist who failed to grasp that his liberal ideals were starkly contradicted by what in his case was his complete lack of confidence in the ability of teachers to do their jobs intelligently. Instead, despite his own success in teaching with great sensitivity refugee children who had been traumatised by war, Pestalozzi placed his faith in the rule of method and the prescribed textbook as instruments which would produce the correct outcomes. Beyond being a rule-governed technician, Pestalozzi's teacher counted for nothing and was awarded no discretion. As Pestalozzi saw the matter,

There can be no real advance until forms of instruction are found, such that the teacher will be the mere mechanical tool of method; the results of which will inevitably rise from the method itself and not from the ability of the teacher who uses it. A textbook is only good insofar as an uninstructed schoolmaster can use it almost as well as an educated and able teacher.⁴

Thus did this noble idealist usher in the rule-driven illiberal classrooms associated with the founding of mass schooling systems in the later 19th Century; classrooms whose stultifying atmosphere of mechanical instruction and learning was satirized by popular novelists like Charles Dickens; classrooms which were rebelled against everywhere by 20th Century progressive educationists; and yet classrooms whose legacy lives on, manifesting itself from time to time in new bureaucratic proposals to develop 'teacher-proof' instruction.

It is important to note that neither Comenius nor Pestalozzi saw the primacy of method and measured results as being some temporary expedient until sufficient numbers of qualified teachers were available to enter the schools. When Pestalozzi said that he wished to 'psychologise instruction' he meant that the role of the teacher as a technician would be cemented into the schooling system forever. In his more recent work on educational policies in developing countries however, the late Dr C. E. Beeby⁵ argued persuasively that although pioneer administrators do have to rely upon formal systems of teacher and school appraisal in the initial years, more autonomy of teaching initiative and class evaluation should be developed as soon as the educational levels of those entering the teaching* workforce rise. This sounds sensible. But how does it stack up against the fact that in Australasia, as in all other affluent western societies, where many generations have now been schooled and where entrants to teaching are required to have advanced tertiary qualifications, the compliance regimes of educational management have not essentially

advanced since the days of technician teachers? Peter Sacks⁶ argues that the use of 'assessment-driven instruction' as a current managerial instrument in many American schools, reflects a profound distrust of teachers. And if he is right, we could be tempted to wonder if any progress has been made since the 18th Century economist, Adam Smith, tartly observed that in '... teaching as in every profession the execution of the greater part of those who exercise it, is always in proportion to the necessity they are under of making that exertion.'⁷

Our misgivings however, need to rest on something more substantial than complaints that powerful people somewhere are being unkind to teachers. Whether someone is being kind or unkind has no relevance. The issue is whether a system of governance is promoting or inhibiting educational progress and to answer this we need to have a clearly articulated vision of good learning and teaching as our benchmark. This unfortunately is too often exactly what we do not have. We infer that the tenets of good learning and teaching do exist, we protest repeatedly that external curriculum constraints dehumanise the classrooms, but when push comes to shove we are poor articulators of what it is we consider the necessary requirements of good educational experience to be. What this means is that classroom interaction is usually reduced to being a non-problematical extra in curriculum management rather than being the focus of syllabus design; a design which as it stands treats students and teachers as being rule-bound conformist players. Above all we often lack also the intellectual resources to argue our case that good education should regard learning and teaching as being processes of critical inquiry; a lack which springs from the fact that our teacher education programmes usually emphasise safety at the expense of inquiry. Writing in 1995 of his own days as a student teacher, Henry Giroux, the liberal American educationist *par excellence*, noted,

During the time I studied to be a teacher, for the most part, I learned how to master classroom methods, read Bloom's taxonomy, and become adept at administering tests. I was never taught to question anything.⁸

And there's the rub. If our systems of teacher preparation eschew questioning, how is it possible for education to become a process of critical inquiry?

It is also puzzling because our everyday experience tells us that questioning is the way that we learn to live in our world. Homo sapiens has a unique capacity to do this via our ability to symbolise our experience. Recently, I witnessed a grandson (18 months old) who, with his mother, was watching the family cat stalk a bird. Upon sighting the bird, the cat stopped walking and assumed the crouch position. Choosing the moment,

the cat, still in crouching mode, sped for its quarry but alas his pounce was too slow. The bird flew off. However, seemingly undismayed, the cat proceeded to hide itself in the bushes in the hope that the bird would soon reappear. Having watched all of this, the infant pointed to the hiding cat and said excitedly to his mother 'walking, running, hiding.' She replied, 'Yes. The cat was trying to catch a bird. Now he hopes the bird will come back so that he can try to catch him again.' The important point to note is the way in which an immature being is already able to narrate a correct history of events as they unfolded. Through his use of a limited vocabulary he is also able to communicate a world-past to another person. His mother, on the other hand, by listening to her child, senses the teachable moment and adds completion to his observation. She sums up what the cat was about and suggests what might happen in the world-future. Here is the essence of the matter. The power to distance oneself from one's present in order to operate upon it via symbolic communication is what the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire calls the power of 'naming the world'; a power not available in this form to other animals. It is not a power centred upon solipsism. We can't have the world just as we wish it to be. But it is a process of learning which can be facilitated by a more knowledgeable person (i.e. teacher) via dialogical communication.

In this instance the mother chose the teachable moment to enlarge her infant's understanding of the world. To do this she needed to be alert to what was catching his curiosity and above all she had to listen to his words so that she could respond to them and thus create a conversation (or a sharing of meaning). A more extensive vocabulary gained as the child matures also enables a listening teacher to spot errors in understanding and, where necessary, correct them. A five year old who had teenage siblings was asked by his mother if he was older than the family cat. He replied, 'Yes I am.' But his mother noted, 'The cat was here before you came wasn't he?' 'Yes,' the child replied 'So the cat is older than you.' (mother). 'No he's not,' came the reply. 'I'm bigger than the cat.' Intelligent errors like this one can be corrected if there is genuine dialogical inquiry occurring between the child and teacher. Thus we have the thrust of Freire's conclusion that learning is '... a synthesis between the educator's maximally systematised knowing and the learner's minimally systematised knowing, a synthesis achieved in dialogue.'⁹

The model of learning and teaching as a process embedded in dialogue is not one that comes to us from ancient history. It is true that the socratic method of teaching with its emphasis upon question and response is part of our legacy from classical Greece. But Freire rightly dismisses it as false dialogue because the teacher merely pretends to be a fellow-seeker of truth and in reality manipulates the conversation to obtain

a preordained response. Other models, as we have seen, invest all authority in 'the method' and require nothing more than conformity to rule by teacher and taught. It is not in fact until we get to the early 20th Century writings of John Dewey that the prospect of students and teacher learning together is entertained in the theoretical literature. And even then, Dewey's stance on the point is far removed from the sometimes hysterical populist criticisms of his work. The concept of dialogue as educational process was refined in the theological writings of Martin Buber¹⁰ whose interest lay in the I—Thou relationship; an interest which flowed through to the liberation theology movement in South America in the 1960s and there strongly influenced the work of Paulo Freire. In recent years, Freire's arguments have been transposed by people who live and work in major urban societies; a notable example of these critics being Henry Giroux.¹¹ The thesis that 'pedagogy equals critical dialogue' does of course lend itself to radical objectives but this is not necessarily or exclusively so. The Peters/Hirst school of educational philosophy which flourished in the UK in the late 20th Century for example, held it to be axiomatic that inquiry pursued in the various disciplines of study required learner and teachers to be engaged in particular rule-governed conversations.¹²

No-one is in any doubt about the challenges facing those who wish to inject critical pedagogy into the life of mainstream schools. Social theorists can amass plentiful evidence of the ways in which schools are often used as illiberal institutions by those who speak in the name of the State,¹³ and in recent years historians of education have been able to show how, spurred on by their influential clientele, it is often schools themselves that have led the way in buying into 'assessment—led instruction' and by so doing, reinforcing what Freire calls the 'banking' system of education (i.e. the learner stores up an item of knowledge, irrespective of its intrinsic utility, in order to produce it for individual profit on examination day.)¹⁴ Now policies which modify these significant and educationally-destructive realities can indeed be devised. But none of them will have any likelihood of success unless we also produce teachers and administrators who are armed with robust pedagogical theory, possess well-attested knowledge and assessment skills, and enjoy the prospect of working with curricular prescriptions which are broad enough to allow teachers, students and other stakeholders to breathe freely. Needless to say the kind of teacher preparation programmes cited earlier by Giroux will not achieve these objectives. What is required is something that goes far beyond the technician teacher; something that comes from educational philosophy and the course process—not the name of the qualification.

Obviously, what is required is also beyond the knowledge and competence of one group of academic specialists (for example, historians of education) to provide. Collaboration among specialist interests to construct a reflective pedagogy of learning and teaching is the prime thing that is needful; an outcome that is based on the interesting assumption that as teachers we will continue to learn much from colleagues of differing interests even as we produce graduates who are much more robustly prepared than is the case at the present time. The central paradox which faces us immediately is that the quality education which few persons dispute the schools should provide, is compromised by the instruments we use to establish quality control. In July 2003, Mr David Miliband, a member of the British Prime-minister's education think tank, proudly reported,

Every school (in the U K) will soon, at the click of a mouse, be able to compare and contrast the performance of individual pupils against other pupils in the school and against similar pupils in other parts of the country.¹⁵

Some enthusiasts might see this as a fine instance of the way that technology can produce educational liberation. But of course it is not. In the context of league-table results, the technology on display here is a recipe for low-level 'banking' learning; learning which rewards or punishes technician teachers on the basis of, allegedly valid, outcomes. When it comes to assessing the advances in pedagogy which are signalled by Miliband's claims, we can see at once that they are little more than historical curiosities. Miliband, in fact, is a 19th Century Mr Gradgrind armed with a computer. His mouse-clicks are no way forward although they certainly will create more 'busy work'.

We need to lift our expectations much higher because it is expectations rather than clicks of the mouse that provide the key to quality. This was T. H. Huxley's priority when he said in 1868 in what was then the world's most powerful nation,

The politicians tell us, 'You must educate the masses because they are going to be our masters.' The clergy join in the cry for education, for they affirm that people are drifting away from the chapel in the broadest infidelity. The manufacturers and capitalists swell the chorus lustily. They declare that ignorance makes bad workmen; that England will soon be unable to turn out cotton goods and steam engines cheaper than other people and then Ichabod! Ichabod! the glory will be departed from us. And few voices are lifted up in favour of the doctrine that the masses should be educated because they are men and women with unlimited capacity of being, doing, and suffering, and that it is as true now, as it ever was, that people perish for the lack of knowledge.¹⁶

It would indeed be fitting, if these words of Britain's finest 19th Century science educator, and the challenge which they lay down to provide humanistic education for all, were posted on the doors of all Schools of Education in the 21st Century.

NOTES

1. This paper was first read at a plenary session of the Australia New Zealand History of Education Society's annual conference held in Perth, December 2003.
2. E. Holmes, *What Is and What Might Be*, London Constable & Co, 1928, p.141.
3. M. J. Keatinge, *The Great Didactic of John Amos Comenius*, Adam & Black, London, 1910, p.5 (Author's emphasis).
4. H. Holman, *Pestalozzi*, London, Longmans, 1909, p.265.
5. C. E. Beeby, *The Quality of Education in Developing Countries*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1965.
6. P. Sacks, *Standardized Minds*, Massachusetts, Persens Books, 1999.
7. A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, London, Methuen, 1930. (Original work published 1776) p.249.
8. H. Giroux, 'Teachers, Public Life and Curriculum Reform' in A. Ornstein & L. Behar (eds). *Contemporary Issues in Curriculum Education*, Toronto, Allan & Unwin, 1995, p.44.
9. P. Freire, 'The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for freedom' in *Harvard Educational Review* Vol.40, No.2, 1970 p.205.
10. M. Friedman, 'The Existential Man: Buber' in P. Nash, *The Educated Man*, New York, John Wiley, 1965, pp.363-388.
11. H. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals*, New York, Bergin & Garvey, 1988.
12. P. Hirst, 'Philosophy & Educational Theory' in I. Scheffler, *Philosophy and Education*, Boston, Allyn & Bacon, 1966.
13. A. M. O'Neill, J. Clark & R. Openshaw, *Reshaping Culture Knowledge and Learning*, Palmerston North, Dunmore Press, 2004.
14. R. Openshaw, G. Lee, H. Lee, *Challenging the Myths*, Palmerston North, Dunmore Press, 1993.
15. Quoted in R. Sutton, 'Am I getting too old', *N.Z. Education Review* 25 June - 1 July 2003. p.16.
16. C. Bibby, 'The Scientific Humanist: Huxley' in Nash, pp.266-267. Speech to the South London Working Men's College.