Madness in our Method? Reconstructing critical educational research.

This paper explores current methodological challenges to critical educational research. It draws on the researcher's own doctoral research project in teacher education to examine some implications of moving beyond modernist notions of methodological "purity". A case is made for straddling critical and postmodernist agendas by means of an interrogative text which is appropriately "untidy" because it seeks to destabilise rather than to quest after certitude.

There are a number of reasons why "madness" might be an appropriate advance (dis)organiser to a discussion of
contemporary research in education. Having recently completed a doctoral research project in the area of teacher education, I feel that I can elaborate on this at some length, but I would nevertheless wish to spare the reader some of the sufferings presumably endured by my thesis examiners.

I would like to take up the issue of Madness in critical research method by pursuing three matters of concern to me as a feminist researcher. The first is the possibility that we are mad to continue to talk in terms of a capital "M" Method given the epistemological challenges of postrationalist theorising. The second is the extent to which emergent articulations of valid research are held to be mad in a mainstream tradition of educational research. The third is the issue of the madness which is experienced by the researcher in actually constructing a new research text which goes about the business of unsettling itself, as well as mainstream theorising of critical research projects.

Do not go gentle?

The value of the notion of Method must be re-assessed in the light of the press coming from a range of writers to work in ways that are different from those of modernist intellectuals. There is little doubt that speaking 'with the confidence of standing at the cutting edge of time and of being able to speak for others' (Huyssen, 1990:271) is no longer an option in a post-Foucauldian intellectual climate. Instead, we are being challenged to move from universal, the time-honoured and the infallible to the local, the tentative and the precarious. For feminists and others involved in the critical educational project, this has signalled a wariness about generalising beyond the boundaries of regional and cultural groupings, as well as an even greater wariness of the oppressive politics of traditional scholarship (Nicholson, 1990:1).

Along with this new caution has come both a new energy and a new cynicism about challenging the sorts of distinctions made by traditional science in demarcating and articulating the logic of scientific inquiry, and this includes the "logic" of Method. Much has already been said about the need for this sort of confrontation (Feyerabend, 1975; Gadamer, 1975; Wolin, 1972). Much has also been said about the need to confront 'the spectre of relativism...the fashionable varieties of relativism that...lead to cynicism and a growing sense of impotence' (Bernstein, 1988:x-4). Debate has raged over the extent to which 'instant rationality' is possible (Toulmin, 1972; Lakatos and Musgrave, 1981), and the extent to which
paradigms are commensurable (Kuhn, 1970; Popper, 1975).

What is becoming more and more apparent in all this is that we are right to become increasingly confident about our lack of confidence in utilising any formulae or methodological blueprint. In Phillips' (1988:56) terms: [P]ursuing an understanding of our fellow humans, like pursuing understanding of the physical universe, involves the making of reasoned judgments by researchers - there is no mechanical method or process by which such understanding can be generated, nor any mechanical process by which conclusions can be substantiated. There may well be constraints determining the range of reasoned judgments that are entertained, but this issue lies unresolved.

For those of us wading out into the increasingly murky waters of research, all this is seductively and depressingly lacking in prescription.

What critical researchers in particular have been contending with is whether certain "postmodern" challenges to these debates can be co-opted for the purposes of resistance, or whether they are, in Irigaray's (1985) terms, the "last ruse" of patriarchy. Contemporary feminist writers continue to grapple with this problem. While feminisms exist in a state of tension with Enlightenment assumptions, they also exist in a state of tension with those for whom the Enlightenment project is wholly abandoned. Harding describes feminist science thinkers as standing 'with one foot in modernity and the other in the lands beyond' (1990:100). She argues that feminist inquiry can and ought to aim at producing 'less partial and perverse representations without having to assert the absolute, complete, universal or eternal adequacy' of such representations (1990:100).

In that feminism 'grew out of the cracks and silences in the old radical articulations' (Hebdidge, 1988:188), its critique of totalising Enlightenment narratives has historical continuity, and postmodernity simply provides another source of such critical ideas. French poststructuralists in particular have provided contemporary theories of power and subjectivity which feminists have been able to put to work against each other (Grosz, 1990:111) in the service of the affirmation of difference. Thus feminist science has continued to guard against any postmodern notion of 'a happy polytheism of language games' which lapses into a-politicism, as Benhabib (1990:123) indicates: [T]here are times when philosophy cannot afford to be a
'gay science', for reality itself becomes deadly serious. To deny that the play of language games may not turn into a matter of life and death and that the intellectual cannot remain the priest of many gods but must take a stance is cynical.

The concern of contemporary feminists to maintain a political agenda has meant countering allegiance to the historical norm of objectivity as well as remaining sceptical about the value of postmodernism for women (Di Stefano, 1990). This may be interpreted, unfairly, as ambivalence, or as wanting "a dollar each way". The strength of such a view is that it opens up new possibilities because of its recognition of 'the permanent partiality of the feminist point of view' (Harding, cited in Di Stefano, 1990:75).

Having grappled with these problems in my own work, I came to reconceptualise my critical project in teacher education as a form of strategic intervention rather than an attempt to apply a given theory by way of a method. It was Grosz's (1990:59) understanding of the notion of a strategy, that seemed apposite: Strategy involves recognising the situation and alignments of power within and against which it operates. It needs to know its adversary intimately in order to strike at its most vulnerable points. It must also seek certain (provisional) goals and future possibilities with which it may replace prevailing norms and ideals, demonstrating that they are not the only possibilities. They can be superseded. What this allowed was a form of contestation which worked against its own tendency to totalising discourse, and one in which it might be possible to see my own complicity in the oppressive politics which is so often characteristic of the research act.

In using Lather's (1991) term postpositivist to describe my work, I signalled my belief that the 'spectator view of science, of knowledge and of teaching is a thing of the past' (Doll, 1989:248); I also sought to indicate that debates such as positivist/anti-positivist, quantitative/qualitative, marxist/pluralist, interpretive/functionalist, are not evoked by actual binary systems. They are strategies embedded in institutions which are themselves implicated in, and productive of, particular configurations of power and knowledge (Hebdidge, 1988:186).
Kicking against the pricks:

When we do refuse and transcend the anti-positivist, anti-empirical impetus that have animated critical modernism in the past (Hebdidge, 1988:192), we engage in research that is more challenging, more controversial and more disturbing across ideological boundaries. For the critical theorist as for the technocrat/managerialist, it may seem to spring from "postmodern" ideas which spell an end to certainty, either on the Left or the Right.

Inquiry which works at the interface of hitherto "discrete" disciplinary areas (in my own study, this included research and pedagogy, teacher socialisation and curriculum theory, psychology and sociology), is theoretically and methodologically provocative (Lather, 1986:260). It proceeds from an understanding of the research process as 'a form of border crossing' (Giroux, 1991:51), a deliberate transgression against traditional territorial boundaries for the purposes of making visible 'the historically and socially constructed strengths and limitations of those places and borders we inherit which frame our discourses and social relations' (Giroux, 1991:52).

I was aware, for example, that I was very definitely moving outside the traditional behaviourist parameters, and their "doppelganger", the neo-Marxist critiques, through which pre-service teacher "relevance" debates have been framed and conducted in the literature. Much had been made of the failure of teacher education research to 'tap the complexities and dynamics of the everyday experiences' of the novice (Battersby, 1986:4). Much had also been said in the critical literature about the need to break new ground in pre-service research (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985; Beyer and Zeichner, 1981; Ginsberg and Newman, 1981; Popkewitz, 1979), yet the claim of Battersby and Ramsay (1983: 78) that researchers 'seem to have become shackled by the chains of their parent theories' still seemed to me to be the predominant picture, even in the 1990's.

In working at the borders and in breaking with old certainties, I hoped to challenge traditions, to refigure disciplinary knowledge about the pre-service experience and to create new objects of knowledge with greater powers of explication. I was greatly assisted in my own attempts to "come again" at a matter which has become "frozen" in the
educational literature, by using a conceptual framework that was applicable, but not developed for, an inquiry into educational needs. Nancy Fraser's (1989) analysis of the politics of needs interpretation in the area of welfare provided fresh analytical tools with which to "unpack" teacher education as similarly an area of contestation in which versions of needs talk struggle for legitimacy.

Pursuing postrationalist inquiry has been much more demanding than reiterating the iconoclasm of "anti-positivists", and the debates that have ensued more vociferous. Inquiry that refuses recuperation and great transformation, that "foster(s) differences and let(s) contradictions remain in tension" (Lather, 1992: 13) reworks the notion of "validity" in ways that are subversive of all forms of orthodoxy. I note with some interest Lather's use of the term 'rhizomatic validity' (Lather, 1992: 14), to describe that research rigour which dissolves interpretations and interrupts impetuous quests to grasp at understanding, in favour of maintaining the process of meticulous and patient documentary. She argues (1992: 14) that functioning rhizomatically is acting via relay, a circuitous journey among intersections, nodes, regionalisations and multi-centred complexities. This metaphor denotes a departure from the notion linear progression from a trunk, a single logic, a tidying imperative.

Such notions understandably evoke more disquiet from traditional researchers than "predictable" re-iterations of "anti-positivism" which, of course, have never really threatened the hegemonic status of positivism, and certainly not in teacher education. In the research culture of teacher educators, action research is still the avant garde, the Other, the method we have when we're not having a method. I noted that the somewhat patronising response given to undertheorised action research projects presented at an international teacher education conference I attended recently were in stark contrast to the disquiet and annoyance with which my own 'rhizomatic' offering was greeted in some quarters. And while I am prepared to concede my own stylistic weaknesses, I do not attribute all of this negativity to the tortured prose of my doctoral days.

Admitting impediments:

Research which 'alters when it alteration finds' is of course, much more challenging to engage in than research which works with the logic of the shoe-horn. Straddling modernist and postmodernist agendas does require the researcher to strike
some quite awkward poses in order to provide corrective reflexive moments throughout her study.

One ever-present dilemma is one of the form in which the research act should be presented. In educational report writing, for example, the notion still prevails that Theory, Method and Results are to be written as discrete chapters "in tandem", carriages on the research train headed away from fragmentation and towards unity, from doubt and towards certainty. There is a great potential for "leaving theory behind" in this linear articulation of the theory/method/results nexus, in that it fails to signal the embeddedness of theory in the entire research task, or to make evident the extent to which the research ought to be generative of theory rather than merely "objective findings". To depict theory as a tidy point of embarkation and "results-as-findings" as a convenient point of disembarkation will nevertheless misconstrue the reflexive nature of the research project and the epistemological assumptions within which it locates itself.

In my own doctoral research into the needs of pre-service teachers (McWilliam, 1992), I attempted, through feminist

postpositivist conceptualising of the nature of educational inquiry, to transcend the binary logic of dominant/avant garde traditions of teacher education without losing sight of emancipatory goals to be achieved through educative research practices. Scepticism was not allowed to lapse passively into cynicism nor commitment accelerate heedlessly into crusade. The notion of working within/against the critical pedagogy agenda (Lather, 1991) certainly did not disavow commitment to socially critically ends, but attempted to ensure against a monovocal, self-centred text as the research product. I regard this as a very important issue for teacher education research where 'voyeurism...and the worst kind of post hoc arrogance' (Fine, 1987: 172) has made 'moving the voices on the margin to the center' (Herrington and Curtis, 1990:489) very difficult indeed.

Conceptualised as feminist research, my study into student needs was 'openly ideological' (Lather, 1991:17). Yet this ought not to be confused with lack of reflectivity or refusal to address information which conflicted with or contradicted my own assumptions and beliefs about teaching and teacher education. On the contrary, it meant a heightened sensitivity to new possibilities that can and do emerge out of the educational knowledge of others. "Prejudgment" in this sense was not to be conflated with prescription.
Yet the logistics of this proved difficult. What became clear to me as I embarking on the final "co-theorising" phase of the study was the fact that "planning, acting observing and reflecting" do not happen as discrete and tidy phases of research, nor do they occur around only one issue. While we were planning in terms of a suitable way forward in addressing one area of concern, others were at various stages of being reflected on, acted on, observed and so on. I was beginning to experience a sense of "loss of control" that I had not felt previously in the overall study.

This could have been interpreted as a positive sign that my role was genuinely one of facilitation, not engineering. Yet I was also aware of the difficulty of making meaning out of the increasingly complex relationships among disparate events occurring simultaneously and at speed. Far from the neatness of the ubiquitous action research "spiral", the metaphor which suggested itself was more reminiscent of the widening gyre of W.B.Yeats's falcon which 'cannot hear the falconer', not any logical or predictable geometry. The sense of urgency these pre-service teachers brought to the task of meeting/critiquing their own needs propelled the research and the participants along at a rate which had not been predicted, and along several paths of inquiry simultaneously.

Any linear or chronological record could not do justice to the interrelationships between "knowledges" generated or boundaries crossed. Critical and constructive analyses emerged at unpredictable times and in unforeseen ways, a reminder to the researcher that knowledge is a process of 'various kinds of re-makings...across the boundaries that ordinarily label the social, the cultural and the personal' rather than 'a solid, though socially reflexive, object' (Wexler, 1987:110). I could neither expect nor demand that knowledge about certain types of needs would be generated in the session devoted, in theory, to the consideration of that issue. Nor could I expect an agenda to remain "in tact" from week to week - indeed, not even from hour to hour.

Further, there was a "mushrooming" effect on the tasks that I had initially set myself, as I was propelled into forums I had hitherto not anticipated engaging in. My role as discourse analyst and group facilitator was expanded to beginning teacher advocate in a range of forums, including a Board of Teacher Registration Working Party on Competency-based Standards and the Teaching Profession, the Queensland Teachers' Union and the unemployment of teachers agenda,
auditing new recruitment interview models trialled by the Department of Education, and the planning of a pilot scheme in 1992 to alter the practicum experience, with supervising teachers working in the area of language and literacy.

It was clear that a "week-by-week" account would not be appropriate to the task of elaborating this range of experiences in terms of "knowledge production". No researcher can hope to legislate what knowledge will be produced when, nor indeed should she expect a linear or even a spiralling progression to be the outcome of genuinely dialogic encounter.

Crossing the bar:

Madness continues to be an issue for the researcher because everything seems possible and yet nothing is possible: the potentialities the dilemmas generated by the "collapse of theory" have never seemed more abundant. It is an issue when there are to be no more 'grand narratives', but the little stories need to be more telling than the totalising tales of the past. It is an issue when academic vocabularies appear to be engaged in a race to be first past the "post" (McWilliam, 1993), as contemporary social theorists perform some quite breathtaking linguistic tricks and feats of Derridean daring. It is an issue when proximity to computers is, for the social researcher, much more comforting than proximity to people. And all this in symbiosis with a social and political and economic context in which the rate of change, to use Toffler's old truism, has never been so great.

It is, therefore, more than tempting to spend our energies mourning the passing of the good old bad old days. Or, more comforting still, we could ignore the imperatives of contemporary social theorising and continue to make "slash and burn" forays up abandoned intellectual gullies. Indeed, it would be more lucrative and less troublesome to do so. Breaking with certainty is daunting and demanding for researchers, whether it is the certainty of positivism or its counter text, radicalism. Without the clear images of blueprints, of facts, of "proven" methodologies and time-honoured assumptions, educational research must be 'slow and sharp', mistrusting old discourses and recipes for pedagogical work. This does not signal any less commitment to critical pedagogy. Indeed, it signals more. In seeking justice for others and ourselves, we must acknowledge and confront the partiality of our own discourses and their potential for
surveillance and repression. And to do this, it is to the play of surfaces generated out of the broken images of old certainties that we must turn.

Bibliography:


