

THE PLACEMENT OF TEACHER VOICE IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally educational research and educational practise existed as polarised extremes. The relationship between the two was characterised by mutual suspicion, criticism and dread. For their part teachers felt somewhat cheated by the fruits of academic labour which had the tendency to be highly critical of teacher work and which, perhaps more importantly was written in a language far removed from the everyday language of teachers. Thus for teachers it appeared very much a case of "those who can, will; those who can't, teach and those who can't teach become educational researchers." With the coming of new research paradigms such as action research, teachers were allowed to enter the research context and become actively engaged in conducting research into their own practise. These advancements, have significantly closed the gap between theory and practise. Nonetheless, there appears to be, in many action research accounts, a lack of what may problematically be defined as "authentic" teacher voice. The "tales" of teaching are thus often sadly lacking in these accounts as teachers attempt to objectify, qualify and quantify their own classroom practise in the name of achieving academic rigour. In essence teachers have attempted to follow the theoretical donkey and have held in reserve their own unique "tales" about their teaching. Those teachers who have attempted to place their teaching tales at the centre of their academic work have often

swayed too far to the other extreme @ missing the donkey completely@ as they become involved in what can only be defined as introspective navel gazing. Does this either\or position need to continue or can a space be found such that teachers tales can be placed on the donkey of educational research in a way which allows for the continuing growth of both? This has been a question which has plagued my own work as a teacher, a researcher and as a teacher\researcher. This paper explores this problem and demonstrates how I have utilised action research methodology, living

educational theory and feminist post@structuralism in an attempt to discover a space between educational research discourse and the discourse of teaching. In essence how I have attempted to place my "tale" on the donkey.

Introductionf

During my years as a teacher I didn't have a lot of "time" for educational research. Indeed I believed that educational research existed beyond the realms of classroom teachers. I also considered from my rather limited knowledge that educational researchers were the enemy of teachers as they seemed intent on criticising the work of teachers only with the aim of advancing their own work. Similarly I found on my return to academic work that the world of teaching and the talk of teachers was not well considered by educational theorists. Thus the thoughts and voices of teachers were not considered to be rigorous or informed and were therefore not acknowledged as a justifiable components of academic research. Thus it appeared that teachers and teacher work existed on one side of a binary formulation with academic researchers and educational theory on the other side. As a teacher\researcher I questioned whether this situation needed to continue or whether the space between the two could be filled in a way which did not denigrate teachers and teacher voice and allowed them to work

actively within the research community and research discourse. This paper address my own exploration of this problem and discusses my attempts to find a space through the utilisation of action research, living educational theory and feminist discourses.

Old Tales: "Authentic" Voice and the Politics of Educational Research

Educational research has traditionally been unsuccessful in actively assisting teachers.

Tripp (1990), asserts that "teachers are suspicious of ivory tower academics" (p. 1) and for good reason, because "teachers are not well served by the products of educational research which has an ideology which tends to denigrate teachers in a number of ways" (p. 51). McWilliam and O'Brien (1993) agree, arguing that it is hardly surprising "given positivistic paradigms of enquiry which have left researchers with a tendency to work on teachers rather than with and for them" (p. 45). In their attempts to quantify educational practice positivistic (eg, process@product research) researchers have often run rough shod over the knowledge and experiences of teachers. Research has been

conducted, therefore, without consultation with or advice from those being researched. The work produced has often categorised teachers in a way which has not recognised or responded to the complexities of the teaching profession. For Woods (1985) such a situation has been made even more problematic by the fact that "the theoretical abstractions of much educational research is remote from teachers hard realism and its terms of debate seem difficult to comprehend" (p.51\52). Thus, teachers have found the language of educational research difficult to understand and embrace within their meaning system. For these reasons teachers understandably view the work of researchers with a great deal of scepticism.

Concomitantly, academics have tended to see teachers as being the perpetrators of ill-informed and undertheorised practice.

In the eyes of many researchers the reliance of teachers on "commonsense knowledge" has, according to Yates (1990) "hidden another real world, one which disadvantages students and which is only given access by their theories" (p.1). By refusing to acknowledge the notion of "useful theory" teachers have perpetuated educational inequality and injustice (Henry, Knight, Lingard and Taylor, 1988). Thus, educational theory and practice have long stood inappropriately as polarised extremes. Primarily concerned with the same thing, namely the improvement of education, teachers and researchers have nonetheless often failed to meet in a position of common ground.

Is this situation inevitable? Walker (1985), argues for an "interactive relationship between researcher and subject...in order to increase the responsiveness of the researcher to the problems, issues and work conditions of the subject" (p. 185). Named *applied research* such a system resists "research designs [which] have overemphasised objectivity at the cost of responsiveness and attention to context" (p. 183). Similarly resisted is the dichotomous relationship between the research and the teacher. Applied research works against such a relationship and "involves the consumer (ie, the teacher) in questions of process and method to the extent that what becomes disseminated is not 'findings' but a research approach" (p. 184). The research approach produced is not a slave to objective methods which aim to produce data which is transferable and generalisable. On the contrary applied research rarely produces generalisable results. What it does do, however, is to open up the research process, such that those who were once considered

merely to be consumers of research, namely teachers, are provided with the information which allows them to research their own work in their own contexts. Walker states that such a concept "is not [an attempt to frame an alternative that excludes conventional research, but it is rather to open up ways of thinking about (and doing

and using)
research that add another dimension to the enterprise" (p. 184).
Whitehead (1993) concurs
with such a view stating that:

as the individual encounters personal and social constraints in his
or her attempts
to improve the quality of education in schools, the concepts from the
psychology
or sociology of education might provide useful in helping to overcome
the barriers
to improvement. (p. 57)

Thus, applied research does not advocate that the researcher ignore
traditional research
paradigms. Rather, it advocates a more constructive merging of theory
and practice @ a
strategy which fosters a partnership as opposed to a battleground of
binary formulations
and oppositions.

If such a strategy is to be formulated, some the traditional views
regarding research skills
and academic writing need to be challenged. Walker (1985), considers
the effects on
research of academic "gatekeepers" who are protecting their interests
and thereby have
the potential to thwart newer forms of research which allow for the
possibility of non™academic voices. He argues:

This is perhaps why the traditional research skills have lingered
longer than might
be expected. People do still write in forms and styles that are
relatively
conventional, certainly conventional enough to find their way into
standard publications, even though the logic of the
situation might seem to be one that
would lead to an emphasis on oral and visual forms of reporting, and to
forms of
presentation that diverge considerably from standard publication. (p.
188)

Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, the notion of academic writing
and the format
required for standard publications often prohibits teachers from
telling their own tales in
their own voices. The use of academic language also prohibits teachers
from
understanding what has been written. Applied research seeks to
overcome this hurdle by

utilising Habermas's view that "there is no privileged access to truth". Whitehead (1993) draws on Habermas to make the point that:

Habermas (1979) says that I must choose a comprehensible expression

so that we can understand one another. I must have the intention of communicating a true proposition so that we can share my claim to knowledge. I must want to express my intentions truthfully so that we can believe what I say. Finally, I must choose an utterance that is right so that we can accept what I say and we can agree with one another with respect to a recognised normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified. (p. 55)

Thus research must be presented in a way which is comprehensible. In this way the findings becomes accessible to all. In the field of educational inquiry, such a notion allows teachers to speak in their own voice and to critically engage with the voices of others. According to Walker (1985) "writing becomes an extension of, or a tool for, thought as well as the vehicle for carrying information" (p. 190). Whose thoughts are conveyed is not limited but rather, open to all those interested in improving the contexts which surround them. In essence such a concept allows teachers to "do" their own research and to speak with their own voices in order to report that research. This vision of creating an authentic space for the knowledge, reflection, research and authorship of practitioners is the basis of action research.

Practitioner Enquiry: Tales of Action Research
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Action Research is a form of enquiry which allows practitioners the opportunity to reflect on, research and thereby improve their own practice. According to Elliott (1988), although the term was first coined by Kurt Lewin in 1946 to "describe a

process of
inquiry which continuously moves through spirals of reflection and
action" (p. 163) the
idea of such a notion has a far longer history.

Long ago Aristotle outlined in his Ethics a form of
practical philosophy or moral
science which involved systemic reflection by social practitioners on
the best
means for realising practical values in action. He argued that through
deliberative
reflection the practitioner not only clarifies the wise course of
action in the
situation, but deepens his understanding of the values they should
realise (he
neglected women as moral agents. (Elliott, p. 163)

This Aristotlean concept of reflecting on one's practice in order to
re-establish values and

make needed improvements has been discussed and refined as a concept
and theory by Lewin (1946) and others. Friere (1972)
advocated that to be authentic and thereby
liberating reflection must involve action:

The insistence at which the oppressed engage in reflection on their
concrete
situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary,
reflection@true
reflection leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation
calls for action,
that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its
consequences become the
object of critical reflection. (p. 42)

Thus, according to Friere, those constrained by the shackles of
oppression must define the
point of their own oppression in order to be freed. This process cannot
take place out of
context. It must occur at the site of oppression. Reflection is not an
end in itself within
the context of this process. Reflection must lead to action and the
action taken rather
than standing as the final point must itself be reflected upon. While
Freire does not
utilise the term action research nonetheless his writings reflect the
cycle of reflection and
action outlined by more specific writers.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) stress the collaborative and the cyclical nature of action research. According to them:

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which they are carried out. (p. 5)

Having defined a common area of concern participants in an action research group undertake four steps which are connected in a continuous cyclical pattern. These are:

- to develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening.
- to act to implement the plan.
- to observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs, and
- to reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of cycles.

McNiff (1988) utilises the work of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) but makes certain adaptations. Perhaps of most interest is her vision that action research does not necessarily need to be collaborative in nature. Rather McNiff "presents an example of how one

practitioner may "come to know" (Stronach, 1986) her own educational practice, and formulate her own theory of education based on that practice" (p. 42). Thus, according to McNiff it is possible for one teacher, acting independently to engage in action research in order to deepen her understanding of an educational issue.

The question which needs to be addressed here is how one defines the educational issue or concern which will become the starting off point for the action research process. Whitehead (1993) explores this problem by developing the concept of living educational theory. Living educational theory is founded in the Aristotelian

concept of values for it's and proposes the concept of utilising living contradictions as a basis for action research. Whitehead argues that when teachers ask the question of how to best improve their practice, they are really asking how they can live their educational values more fully in their practice. Educational problems arise, according to Whitehead when the educational values held by teachers are not fulfilled in their teaching practice. Therefore, it is through the discovery of their own living contradictions that teachers discover their own unique questions for educational research. To provide an extreme example, if a teacher values the intelligence of each of her students and yet seems repeatedly to work against making this something which is visible to the students, then this is a pedagogical contradiction and it demands research into the nature of how this contradiction occurs and what strategies can assist to overcome it.

Whitehead is not alone in his belief that contradictions should lie at the centre of the research process. Feminists have also considered the importance of contradictions. Luke (1994) while not mentioning the idea of contradiction specifically does, nonetheless explores the importance to feminist work of not being bound by the conventionalities of male dominated research formations which attempt to tidy and objectify. She speaks of the need to work at sites which are plagued by contestation.

Cautious not to collectivise or speak for others, much feminist writing weaves its way through pluralities, local sites, subjectivities and cultural identities so infinitely intersected by a host of markers (national, cultural, sexual, class, colour, age, ability etc), that each women's location and experience in history does, in fact and in theory, become irreducible to women as a group. (p. 14)

Expressing a compatibility between contemporary feminist research, grounded as it is in post-structuralist discourse, and the critical paradigm of action

research may be seen as

theoretically risky. Jennings (1994) argues however, that critical action research and postmodern discourses (and thus much feminist writing) do not need to be conceptualised as unhappy bedfellows. She believes that action researchers "cannot remain immune from new knowledges that develop around us..being able to look at the world from a number of different and possibly incompatible points of view is a matter of learning to challenge oneself and to experience growth" (p. 94). One of the new points of view which can be used to challenge action researchers is provided by postmodern visions, especially as, rather than being entirely dissimilar, the two contain commonalities which can be mutually informing.

Both Postmodern and Critical approaches share a common message about the nature of society. The message is one of knowledge and power, conflict and contradiction as well as the irreconcilability of social goals, aims and values. Conflict, contradiction and lack of consensus primarily exist because of power relations which produce subordination and assign some voices to silence and marginalisation. The value of poststructuralist (a subset of postmodernism) can provide a very useful tool to the Action Researcher in exposing dominant forms of discourse which silence non-dominant voices by power and power relations. (Jennings, 1994, p. 96)

In the course of this document it has been argued that teachers voices have been marginalised and indeed silenced in academic discourse. Interestingly enough, however, while it has been stated that research\practice binaries need to be overturned such that teacher voices can be heard, there has been to date no attempt made in this document to subvert the dominant paradigm. Thus, to this point, "authentic" teacher voices have been subsumed by academic conventions. Such a contradiction is indicative of the power of the "academic" as an expert discourse. Teacher voice, as it has been argued, has not traditionally been valued in educational research. To merely launch

therefore into one's own conceptualisations and contradictions without first justifying such assertions in rigorous academic argument is to be considered "soft", ie, to raise concerns about validation in terms of rigorous scholarship.

Despite this criticism I have to similarly acknowledge that there is a danger in merely launching into the "tales" of teaching without some utilisation of academic rigour i.e., the

danger of introspective navel gazing. Reports (Bellamy, 1994; Whitehead, 1993) which utilise living educational theory often collapse under the weight of being preoccupied with self reflection. While they provide the reader with interesting stories and are often a welcome relieff that to advance "research" there must be some attempt made to inform others to advance critical debate and discussion. It is in these areas that many personal dialogues are somewhat lacking. This is not to suggest that living educational theory is without merit. It allows teachers the possibility of reflecting on their own contradictions and utilising them as the starting point for research. Similarly it provides teachers with the ability to tell their own tales about teaching. However, work is needed to ensure that these gains are not lost by writers who merely replace one set of negative formulations for another. Space needs to be found between the two levels such that teacher voice and academic discourse can be recreated and can come together as mutually informing discourses. The use of feminist postmodernism provides a means by which for a living educational theory can be reconceptualised so as to resolve some of it's fundamental problems while still remaining distant from objectified research paradigms.

Feminist Post Modernism: A Novice Tells Her Tale

To shift paradigm and utilise the work of feminist postmodern discourses is a move fraught with danger and difficulties. To leave the "safe" almost

predictable world of
critical theory is not easy. It would be a lie to suggest that I am
totally comfortable in
this new paradigm, but then postmodernism denies the worthiness of
academic comfort
as it confronts, challenges and continually destabilises old paradigms
and existing
discourses. According to Hartley (1994),

Postmodernism would seem to be rather clearly in favour of
relativism, in as far
as it is capable of clarity and hostile to the idea of unique,
exclusive, objective,
external or transcendent truth. Truth is elusive, polymorphous,
inward,
subjective. (p. 232)

Within the context of postmodernity there is no single identifiable
truth. This has
implications for the way in which educational research is framed.
Perhaps more
importantly it allows for new possibilities in the writing of that
research. According to Lather (1991) "to write postmodern
is to simultaneously use and call into question a
discourse, to both challenge and inscribe dominant meaning systems in

ways that
construct our own categories and frameworks as contingent, positioned,
partial" (p. 153).
It is the heralding of the "subjective" and the "partial" in postmodern
work which have
been taken up by feminist writers who have sort to subvert the dominant
traditions of
male theorising. Luke (1993) argues that "the challenging and complex
issues of
difference, essentialism or subjectivity have generally not been taken
up by male theorists
in any sustained or political way" (p. 4). In post modern discourses
the "subjective" is
not considered to be the same as the "individual". Such a distinction
is important.
McWilliam (1992) argues that:

The preference for the term "subject" over "individual" and
"subjectivity" over
"individualism" is a very significant shift in contemporary social
science. It
signals the emergence of theoretical approaches which emphasise the way
in which

the social domain constitutes human "being" within it, rather than vice versa.

Against the notion of an irreducible humanist essence, feminist poststructuralists argue for a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and constantly in the process of reconstitution through discourse. (p. 87)

Once again the notion of the existence of "truth" is denied. Subjective accounts have no more claim to "truth" than do more objective paradigms. They too exist merely as discursive moments. They are tales. They are not just tales which are full of sound and fury and ultimately signify nothing. On the contrary subjective tales can be utilised to illicit challenge and response and in the case of my own work can open up the possibility of improved action.

What follows then is my own subjective tale of teaching. While it is local, precarious and made fictitious by the knowledge that truth is never present, the tale is nonetheless "telling" in that it embodies the living contradiction which has become the basis of my research work.

Telling Tales

What is presented here is only one of the tales I have utilised in my own dissertation work. It is a telling tale in that it reflects my own contradictory position in relation to policy discourse. This contradiction has become the basis for the action research work in which I am currently engaged.

A Tale of Qui Tacet Consentire

Like others before me, I began my teaching career with a bundle of ready made philosophical, sociological and psychological strategies carefully developed through my teaching course and practice teaching experience. As well as these, I also carried a substantial ideological commitment to Critical\Neo Marxist

philosophies. From such a position I held the view that government visions of education were inherently flawed because they ultimately served the bourgeois system and the capitalist elite. Thus, government discourse was to be resisted at all opportunity as it was ultimately detrimental to the good of teachers and students. Thus I had a resistive discourse to government educational policy. This discourse which I actively pursued in my pre-service years was not obvious when I entered my profession. To give an example in 1990, when the Queensland Review of Tertiary Entrance Procedures (The Viviani Report) was tabled in parliament, I remained unconcerned. Unconcerned is perhaps an understatement. I didn't even read it, missed the inservice on it and generally could be seen sticking my head in the sand in relation to it. My professed stance that government documents were inadequate and needed to be challenged had not changed. Despite this however, I had not gained the knowledge needed to challenge government policy. The result of my ignorance about the document was predictable. When the report came to be passed I accepted the changes to the system. What other path was left open to me? I was ignorant and unsure about the whole thing. It is hardly a productive position to resist, if resist I should have, a piece of government legislation.

This tale contains a living contradiction. On the one hand, my values dictated that I resist government incursions into my teaching practice. On the other hand I was uninterested in actively resisting such documents and, as a consequence, inadvertently accepted the policies. It is this contradiction which has become the central issue of my own action research project. In essence I am attempting to answer the question of "How can I improve my practice by becoming more actively/reactively engaged with government policy."

Conclusion

It is a shame in some ways that I feel the need to be constrained by

convention and attempt a conclusion. A conclusion indicates closure and I am resistive towards making such a closure. This resistance is born not only out of the knowledge that closure is not the postmodern thing to do but also because I feel that much of what I have said would benefit from informed discussion and dialogue. Thus I feel perhaps that it is better not to conclude but to recapitulate my intent. I began with the view that traditional research paradigms had tended to work against teachers and that a binary had been established between educational research on the one hand and educational practise on the other. Throughout the paper I explored the terrain and examined some newer paradigms which have attempted to fill the space between the two. However, I have been critical of certain of these attempts for still failing to allow "authentic" teacher voice to be heard because of a short falling in academic tenets which retain sceptism about the value of such teacher voice. I have similarly been critical of alternative approaches which have relied too heavily on personal dialogue and have not made enough room for academic discourse. Thus, I have argued that while the terrain has shifted the binary has not been overcome. Recent feminist work may allow a new approach through which the space between these binaries may be filled. In my own work I have relied on feminist post modern discourses as a way of allowing me to tell a tale about my own teaching. This is not to say, however, that I have resisted more critical paradigms. Action research is still my main methodological tool. Thus, I have utilised my tentative tale to act as a launching pad for discovering my own living contradictions and begin a path for created a li.....ave now shifted and all is uncertain and unclear. Perhaps however, my main point is that tales are afterall for the telling and that my own tale of research resonating as it does with uncertainty is perhaps a "telling tale" in it's attempt to create a

space for teacher voice in
educational research.

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