

Irony Deficiency and Educational Research ®

Erica McWilliam

Paper presented at The Australian Association of Research in Education annual conference,
Melbourne, Nov-Dec 1999.

Conference Sub-Theme: Defining Worthwhile Knowledge

Subject Area: (Other) The nature of educational research

Correspondence to:

Dr Erica McWilliam, Associate Professor

School of Cultural and Policy Studies

Faculty of Education

Queensland University of Technology

Locked Bag No.2, Red Hill, Queensland, 4059.

Ph. (07) 8643412 (W), (07) 2164106 (H).

FAX (07) 8643728

e-mail: e.mcwilliam@qut.edu.au

Abstract:

Most educational research in education is conducted to solving problems or to advocate for the needs of a particular group of individuals. Such projects usually attempt to familiarise the researcher with phenomena that are as yet unfamiliar. By contrast, ironic research seeks to raise questions about the familiar world by studying it as strange or unfamiliar. Taking a genealogical approach is one way of doing this; the strategic use of literary criticism is another. In this paper, I consider the importance of maintaining tension between 'problem-solving' and 'ironic' research in the conceptualisation and performance of educational thinking. My intent is to challenge the hegemonic view that problem-solving or advocacy are the only defensible rationales for conducting research in education. I make the case that ironic texts are necessary both to a liberal order of thought and to the field of educational practice.

Irony Deficiency and Educational Research

During the time I was writing the book *Pedagogical Pleasures*, (McWilliam, 1999), a well-meaning friend recommended that I read Jim Garrison's work *Dewey and Eros* (1997) because it was clearly also about the pleasure of teaching. This friend was even moved to sympathise that Garrison's book may well have 'stolen my thunder'. It may well have been this that prompted me to devote a substantial amount of the final chapter of my book to indicating how my text was different from Garrison's text as a system of logic. Mine was an ironic text; Garrison's was a call to solve educational problems. I want to return to the specifics of this comparison later in the paper. Before doing so, however, I want to elaborate what I mean by 'ironic' research, and indicate more broadly its usefulness to educational thought.

Ironic research is research that, in Richard Rorty's terms, refuses a final vocabulary of explanation (Rorty 1989:73). The researcher resists the imperative to tidy up, to provide the vision splendid, to advocate, to condemn, to redeem. In expressing this view, I am not suggesting that Martin Luther King got it all wrong - that the mountaintop ought to be supplanted by a more mundane landscape of scepticism and doubt. Rather, I am arguing with writers like Donna Haraway the importance of a place for ironic texts alongside advocacy in order to 'keep the faith' in a liberal humanist order of things. As Haraway puts it, irony is faithful to a liberal social order in the same way that blasphemy is faithful. Blasphemy is in this sense the Vitamin B which is so necessary to the problem of irony deficiency in the body of teaching research. As Haraway argues:

Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. (p. 149)

In research on teaching, ironic or blasphemous texts are those that do not produce formulae and visions and truths for making ourselves into 'lead managers' or 'quality professionals', or 'nurturing caregivers', or 'excellent teachers' or 'reflective practitioners' or 'facilitators of learning' or 'critical pedagogues' or even 'good citizens'. The sort of knowledge produced by ironic research is 'self-referential' knowledge (Baert, 1998), that is, knowledge which cuts across traditional consensus to create distance from our most familiar categories, treating them as contingent and strange. Used in this way, self-referential knowledge is not specifically knowledge which informs one about *oneself* (eg, critical self-reflection), but

rather asks about those taken for granted knowledges through which we *produce* our selves as works of art (eg, as 'critically self-reflective').

My first remembered confrontation with the power of irony came when I read the final two lines of Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill*: 'Time held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the sea'. As I had previously understood it, 'brownness' was necessary to 'dying', and 'sadness' the condition of the 'chained'. It was the first time I understood how words could be used against themselves to produce compelling new truths - ie, that youth might be understood as not *opposed to* death, but a necessary condition for dying; that one takes one's pleasure from within the very condition of being unfree. For me at sixteen years of age, this came as an idea that powerfully disrupted the linear, fixed logic of my academic and spiritual training.

Much more recently I have seen on a brochure promoting a motivational seminar in my own city, depicting the five speakers who are presented as 'masters of business'. The fact that they are all men, I am disappointed to say, comes as no surprise. What *is* surprising is that the first face belongs to none other than Mikhail Gorbachov, that thoroughly reconstructed anti-communist and all round good capitalist guru. And oh the exquisite irony of the fact that 'Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf is depicted *on his left!* Who among us could have even imagined, let alone predicted such a scenario a decade ago?

No earthly good?

Despite the often-expressed idea that postmodern tyrannies abound, ironic scholarship remains marginal at a time when the alternatives seem to be one-dimensional best practice formulae or the proliferation of identity politics, or some combination of the two (ie, quality-meets-social-justice, feminism-meets management and so on). As Rorty notes in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), ironists are far outnumbered by people who believe in 'an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities' (p. xv), ie, people who believe in 'some form of Enlightenment rationalism' (p. xv). Ironists are more likely to be involved in the much more slippery business of refusing to use language as though it were inviolate and unable to be exceeded. This means that there is no intention to 'underwrite or dissolve' doubt. Doubt is maintained - insisted upon - as useful and important. In this way, ironists signal that any choice between one vocabulary and another is not made 'within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real' (p. 73). Appeals to authority of science or to the accusation of false consciousness are both made problematic. As Rorty goes on to say:

Ironists...[realise] that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of their selves. (pp. 73-74)

The very fragility that is so important to the ironist for keeping tensions in play can be easily dismissed as irrelevance. While I for one welcome the threat that fragile knowing represents, many do not, and with compelling reasons if they have made heavy investments in one particular Truth which must be held sacrosanct. Rorty makes mention of the 'special resentment'(p. 90) that ironists arouse in others, particularly those others whose commonsense is re-described in ways that apparently render it 'futile, obsolete, *powerless*'(p. 90, his italics). For those who argue 'a connection between

redescription and power'(p. 90), the ironist's refusal to assure others that any one redescription is more liberating than any other comes as both a desire to humiliate (p. 90), but - more crucially - 'an inability to empower'(p. 91). The ironist then wears the tag of the dilettante, the socially useless, the antithesis of the problem-solver, the advocate, the social worker, because her concern 'to intensify the irony of the nominalist and the historicist'is 'ill-suited to public purposes' and thus 'of no use to liberals *qualiberals*'(p. 95). Irony looks too much like capriciousness, whimsicality, lack of commitment, and even cowardice.

As an ironist I do not appeal to my readers to become transformative intellectuals. I do not 'get...the message across'by speaking a language that 'all of us recognise when we hear it' (p. 94). Unfortunately for me, such recognition translates into publication royalties, among other things. The ironist is much less likely to benefit materially from her work than, authors of meta-explanatory texts like *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. The best I could hope for is a parodic sequel (eg, 'What about Uranus?', or "How are you on the whole?") Moreover, the fact that ironic texts do not lend themselves to being easily reduced to a list of dot points or an executive summary diminishes the likelihood of corporate influence and/or career promotion. And there is no guarantee that the ironic classroom teacher will use humour any more successfully than her emancipationist and/or entrepreneurial colleagues. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the active enterprising educational consultant, as I currently see them operating in schools and universities, is that they are much more astute than academics in combining the skills of the slapstick comedian with the slickness, sincerity and missionary zeal of the tele-evangelist.

The book I mentioned at the outset of this paper, *Pedagogical Pleasures* (1999), is about self-referential knowledge acquisition. It is blasphemous text in two respects: it is unashamedly about *teachers* rather than *students*; and it does not offer any *solution* to pedagogical *problems*. In putting teachers in the centre of inquiry about pedagogy, the book cuts across the current educational consensus about best pedagogical practice. One thing all good teachers are supposed to know as a result of their professional training is that students' needs are all that really matter. The research documented in the book arises out of ambivalence about this proposition and about the optimism that so often accompanies it, bringing forward for scrutiny what had come to count as true in a new generation of instructional texts dedicated to solving pedagogical problems. In making teachers' pleasures the object of analysis, I was not seeking knowledge that could save teachers from marginality or from the stresses and strains of pedagogical work. Nor did I seek to help teachers to 'grow and develop as professionals'. Instead, the book explores what can be learnt about the lived conditions in which teaching and learning takes place by thinking about the pleasures that have become available to us as teachers - how we have come to explain them and 'feel' them.

Because *Pedagogical Pleasures* was written with the intention of troubling a burgeoning, progressive literature about pedagogy, it is an irreligious, even profane text, in that it refuses either to endorse or oppose such work. I wanted instead to make trouble for conventional texts and their doppelgangers, by '*re-describing*' them (Rorty, 1989) as part of the larger game of truth and falsity we call pedagogical knowledge. This involves some 'smartarserie', a term used by one of the authors I cite to connote subversive student comment in the classroom. However my playfulness is serious. The smartarserie I engage in is the vital work of attending to the 'irony deficiency' that is a hallmark of so many academic texts on teaching -- texts that are too literal, too late. It is not a heavily theoretical book, but at the same time I did not want to do violence to complexity by flattening it out into clear speech which invites readers to mis-recognise complex practices as simplistic, and their telling as innocent (Lather, 1995).

Performing irony

To probe more closely the nature of ironic research as a performance, I want to return to the comparison with Jim Garrison's *Dewey and Eros* (1997) promised in the introduction to this paper. I could hardly pretend an innocent or objective view in this work since I was using my own work as a point of comparison. The sub-heading 'Dewey-eyed about eros' was certainly overt evidence of my lack of innocence as a reviewer. My intent was to show how the two books differ in their treatment of the nature and purposes of teaching because I worked as a genealogist (i.e. showing how truth games are played) and Garrison worked as an advocate (i.e. arguing for a particular truth).

In his introduction to *Dewey and Eros*, Garrison indicates that he intends to 'employ Dewey's philosophy to clear new trails for educational inquiry' (1997, p. xix). Given that Rorty identifies Dewey as 'an historicist in whom the desire for a more just and free community dominates' (Rorty 1989, xiv), and given that I self-identify as taking pleasure in writing as an ironist, the differences in the texts are somewhat predictable. Nevertheless, I wanted to underline these differences to counter the naive pluralism that continues to be so stultifying of our capacity to think about education as a project. Ours are not parts of one big, happy family of texts.

Garrison begins by proposing that there is an educational need that, through his book, he seeks to fill. He does so by speaking of education as 'desperately need[ing] re-enchantment' (1997, p. xiii), a need that can be met by restoring something that was once in evidence and has now gone missing-eros-'that loving, life-affirming, passionate "desire" that is the most basic type of love' (p. xix). By contrast, my interest is in understanding teaching in ways that refuse closure around the matter of what good teaching ought to be. I think something more might be learned about teaching by 'think[ing] of all good teachers as working properly rather than in some universally ethical way' (Chap. 1, p.13). I do not want to exclude the possibility that proper teaching might not be loving or vigorous or logical at any given time and place. Thus I do not identify a supreme aim for teacher education, nor an ultimate goal for my scholarship, and I do not understand this as an omission, but a commission, of my text.

In refusing the lure of 'some universal ethical way,' I am being hailed to Michel Foucault and similar writers who insist that 'experience is historically constituted out of games of out of truth and error' (Chap. 1, p.19). Garrison's preferred 'universally ethical way of teaching', is that version of liberal education exemplified by the 'ancient wisdom' of *phronesis* (the practical wisdom of the Greeks) and the educational work of John Dewey, 'the most prominent philosopher of education in the twentieth century' (p. xix). Thus, while I argue there is value in 'turning the logic of liberal education on its head', Garrison argues the value of restoring certain liberal traditions of thought in education, including 'the ancient conversation about poetry, prophecy and the education of *eros* [that] has been almost totally forgotten' (p. 2).

Garrison's is thus a project of reclamation for reconstruction. His first chapter is 'devoted to recovering and reconstructing Platonic wisdom regarding the education of eros' (p. xiii). He situates his work within a meta-reconstructive project, which he understands as 'the continuous reconstruction of ideas to meet the needs and purposes of an ever-changing world' as Dewey 'would have recommended' (p. xx). Garrison sees Dewey's work as crucial here, in that it was Dewey who reclaimed the practical wisdom of the ancients but also combined this successfully with love and logic. In doing so Dewey made it possible for 'the ethical, aesthetic and cognitive threads of vital experience' to be drawn tightly together 'to yield the whole fabric of life, not just shreds' (p. xx).

My work also looks to other times and works, but not in order to 'yield the whole fabric of life'. I want to work with the shreds, because I expect them to offer up more interesting possibilities for analysis of the discursive organisation of teaching at this point of historical time. I am suspicious of the idea that shreds can come together to form a continuous or 'whole' fabric. My assumption is that any notion of 'holism' or continuity of experience is created out of the texts available to me in the work I do to bring my self into being. I therefore understand that my interest is to disassemble through description rather than 'draw together'. I attempt to play across elements within the discursive organisation of relational pedagogy rather than pronounce on their wisdom or lack of it.

Garrison names the state of values education as a present problem for education and sees himself as an advocate of a particular solution. 'Overcoming the modern prejudice against emotion and imagination', he argues, '... is only part of the answer to the problem of values education ... [It is] also how to create alternative values' (p. xvi). Teachers have an obligation to 'recognize their students' unique, individual needs, desires, interests, dreams, and best future possibilities' (p. xvii). This statement of Garrison, perhaps more than any other in his book, speaks a language that, as Rorty put it, 'all of us recognize when we hear it' (Rorty 1989, 94). My work seeks to take this moment of recognition as a point of departure, not a point of consensus. How has it been possible to think teaching this way? How might this most familiar text be characterised as a "strange" idea about teaching? To what end?

Irony has its own telling performances, but they are not the predictable performances of the motivational speaker or the orthodox educational researcher. When ironic methods such as genealogical inquiry are employed, different questions can be asked and different knowledge objects may be produced for scrutiny. Let me cite an example of irony at work in social analysis by describing the introduction to a lecture given by a colleague of mine to a group of undergraduate students who were training to be teachers. My colleague began by asking the students - somewhat to their surprise - whether any of them had sex in public. There was, as the reader might well imagine - some giggling and general silliness by way of the student response, the gist of which was, of course, that they did not. If you do not have sex in public, my colleague asked, then why not? Again there were a range of playful responses, but when my colleague insisted on this as a serious question, the student response was pretty much an agreement that it was because they would be both embarrassed by such behaviour and that it would opening them up to the possibility of arrest by the police. Why would they be embarrassed? Why would they be arrested? Because, they answered with some exasperation as well as amusement, (as we all know) public sex is immoral.

It was at this point that my colleague posited another view - that the reason the students did not have sex in public was *because of the chimney and the hallway*. This proposition was greeted with somewhat scornful laughter. He went on to explain that sexual acts had always been conducted in public when people slept together around and open fire - that private sex and its concomitant 'morality' was only produced after it became possible to have a private heated space for sexual activity, and this was provided by the chimney and the hallway combining in the architectural design of public housing - the chimney because it made it possible to warm an entire house with separate rooms, and a hallway because it made it possible for people to walk through a house and avoid a particular room.

Now it is not that this is the Truth about how we have come to think of sex as naturally private. But it is a way of thinking about the issue that is not made available through orthodox or mainstream disciplinary methods such as those used in biology, medicine or psychology. Taking a genealogical approach to the practice of sex provides a space in which discourses about sex can be prised apart from discourses about cognition, morality or hygiene. In providing such a space, we allow ourselves to reclaim discourses that may be

submerged or unthinkable in the present. The students in this case were left pondering new questions. They could see a logic to this unorthodox reading of 'proper' sexual activity, and yet they *knew* they felt differently about the issue. They knew the proper way to feel about public sex but were also being introduced to the possibility of its 'un-naturalness', the contingency and fragility of its construction. It was an analysis that made familiar ideas strange and therefore less trustworthy. Not to trust one's own common sense is a risk. But learning, as Peter Taylor (1997) points out, is such a risky business.

One useful move for the ironic educational researcher is to step outside the 'obvious' view that training is a subset of education, in order to offer up fresh accounts of how teachers and students engage in pedagogical work and what they feel about it. This means prising the word 'training' away from its moorings in scholastic literature on teaching and learning, refusing to understand it as *necessarily* tainted or limited by its apparent opposition to 'progressive' pedagogy. It means insisting that the word can have a different connotation when it is not opposed to 'liberal education'.

Now I am aware that the very word 'training' is problematic for many teachers and teacher educators. The idea that we have been carefully trained in good pedagogy, or that we can and should train others is problematic for us because 'training' is part of a rhetoric we have come to associate with narrow technicism. Whether we are more familiar with liberal humanistic accounts of good teaching or with those which emanate from a critical politics, training comes to us as a version of pedagogical work that is deficient, either because it does not take into account the 'whole child', or that it does not take into account the socio-political realities of 'context'. Training is understood to focus on the narrow qualities of workmanship rather than broader issues of style, flair, or whose interests are being served. So the idea that we, as good teachers, spend much of our time training our students in proper moral conduct ('be a good listener'; 'think globally, act locally'; 'express yourself') is disturbing because, in the language we use to speak 'good pedagogy', training is framed as insufficient. Whether as 'excellence in teaching' or as 'best practice in facilitating learning' or as 'lead-managers in the classroom' or as 'consciousness raising' or as 'feminist pedagogy', definitions of 'good' pedagogy have for some time insisted that training is an emaciated subset of the bigger and more important project of 'educating'. R.S. Peters' comment made over 3 decades ago remains at the centre of the progressive educator's logic:

[T]he demand for 'liberal education' has been put forward as a protest against confining what has been taught to the service of some extrinsic end such as the production of material goods, obtaining a job, or manning a profession. In other words it has been a plea for education rather than vocational training or training of hand or brain for utilitarian purposes. (1966: 43)

There is value in turning the logic of 'liberal education' on its head. This is in keeping with poststructuralist tendencies to reverse or displace the terms that are most familiar to educational scholarship. For example, the State can and has been located as, in many senses, a sub-set of the macro-entity called 'government', rather the other way around, as understood within the intellectual orthodoxies of the Hegelian-Marxian tradition. It is not a matter of simply being perverse. The reversal of the terms is an attempt to generate more explanatory power by forging new tools of analysis which prise apart the very logic by which certain lived conditions are experienced and understood. They allow us to engage in a sort of knowledge production that would otherwise be unspeakable, unknowable. Most importantly for analyses such as I attempt in *Pedagogical Pleasures*, it moves us towards understand the temporal and partial nature of common sense and scholarly knowing without demanding that a theory of about ideology as false consciousness be present to drive that understanding. We may even subvert commonsense and Karl Marx at the same time!

Conclusion

Irony is a bright and shiny bauble among modernity's store of tarnished playthings. It is of particular relevance when mind-numbing formulae for best practice abound, all of which seem to demand a sort of naïve optimism on the part of professional workers (as well as an inordinate amount of time spent in the gym). What is so useful about irony is its capacity to keep ideas *in play*, constantly moving, jumping about, making trouble. It is a way of refusing to settle finally on *the* account, *the* formula, the set of principles for good moral, political, economic or pedagogical order. This means that irony is not the medium of the literalist or the evangelist, since the performative stress is on the importance of *not* being earnest. Moreover, as with all humour, irony depends on knowing how something works. Many successful comedians make people laugh by setting up an absurd proposition and then piling on proof in support of it. This means using reason for the very purpose of unfixing reason. So too irony unfixes words, meanings, accounts by using them against themselves. Ironists are sincere about their insincerity, serious about their pleasure.

Tension will certainly remain between irony as a vocabulary 'necessarily private, unshared and unsuited to argument' and the vocabulary of justice which is 'necessarily public and shared'(Rorty, 1989: xiv). Like Rorty, I want to argue the importance of keeping in play both of these scholarly approaches as necessary elements in a liberal educational order. Just as we need those historicist writers whose see 'the desire for private perfection' as tainted by 'irrationalism and aestheticism', so too should we engage with those who are 'useful exemplars of... what private perfection...can be like' (p. xiv). This means insisting on the importance of their separate contributions, rather than feeling compelled to choose between them. While we may want to 'diminish divides' in our research (Clift, 1999: 7), there are some differences that should be maintained in the interests of intellectual robustness and social health. It is for this reason that the refusal of ironists to be advocates and problem-solvers is worth respecting.

References

Baert, P. (1998) Foucault's history of the present as self-referential knowledge acquisition. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 24 (6) 111-126.

Clift, R. (1999) The 1999 Division K Program: Discussing the Role of Research for the Next Century, *AERA Teaching and Teacher Education Newsletter*, Winter.

Foucault, M. (1980) *The History of sexuality, Vol. 1: An introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon.

Haraway, D. 1991. *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature*. London: Free Association Books.

Lather, P. (1995) *Troubling Clarity: The politics of accessible language*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting. San Francisco, April.

McWilliam, E. (1999) *Pedagogical Pleasures*. New York: Peter Lang.

Peters, R.S. 1966. *Ethics and education*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Rorty, R. (1989) *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, P.G. 1996. Pedagogical challenges of open learning: looking to borderline issues. In *Pedagogy, Technology and the Body*, edited by E. McWilliam and P. G. Taylor. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 59-77.