

## **Educational research in a global economy of knowledge production: what troubles a travelling textworker?**

**Noel Gough**

**Deakin University, Victoria, Australia**

### **Introduction**

This is not the paper I intended to write seven months ago when I submitted the abstract you might have read in this conference's program, although many of its key foci remain. My original purposes for the paper were to explore some ways in which difference (with particular reference to race, ethnicity, language and location) might be related to individual and/or community dispositions to take up (or to reject) specific research methodologies and epistemologies, and to consider the implications of such differences and dispositions for collaborative transnational research. These questions about methodology and difference were prompted by my experiences of doing educational research in and/or focused on South Africa since 1997 (see, for example, Gough 1997, 1998b, 1999b, 2000b, 2001).

I have written a different paper because local and global events resulted in my most recent visit to South Africa, during the first two weeks of September 2001, being a profoundly different experience from my six previous visits since July 1998. I will briefly recount this recent experience and then present an exploration of some methodological issues that have been a persistent focus of my work in South Africa. I invite readers to reflect on these issues in the light of their own experiences of the events of late August and early September 2001.

### **Two weeks, two terrors**

When I left Australia on 30 August 2001 the plight of the asylum seekers on the *Tampa* was headline news in Australia. My own thoughts about the Federal Government's response to this situation were already being shaped by my experiences in southern Africa. I wondered, for example, how John Howard and Phillip Ruddick might have responded if the asylum seekers on the *Tampa* had been white farmers fleeing from Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

I arrived in Durban, South Africa, just as the UN World Conference Against Racism was beginning in that city. My work with doctoral students at the University of Durban-Westville was conducted against a backdrop of daily news of the various controversies that dogged the conference, especially the attitude of the USA that culminated in its delegation withdrawing from the conference.

A majority of the students with whom I worked were researching educational aspects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic that was affecting up to 40% of the population in some areas of KwaZulu Natal province. One student was documenting the impact of HIV/AIDS on teacher attrition. Another was conducting life history research with AIDS orphans. Others were tackling questions about inclusive curricula for township and rural school populations in which 10-20% of children are terminally ill with HIV/AIDS.

My last day in Durban was Tuesday 11 September. South Africa's television channels were saturated immediately with CNN coverage of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers and its aftermath, but on 12 September the daily newspapers reported the events in different ways. Cape Town's broadsheet, *The Cape Times*, devoted 12 pages to descriptions and analyses whereas the tabloid *The Sowetan* (at over 2 million copies sold

per day, South Africa's biggest selling daily newspaper) had just three pages, most of which were filled with photographs. From page 4, *The Sowetan* was business-as-usual.

Most of the South Africans I mixed with over the next two days paid little attention to the events in New York and Washington, other than to bemoan the massive increase in (very inefficient) airport security and the resultant delays and changes to their travel plans. Their indifference is unsurprising given the everyday effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and some of the world's highest violent crime rates. The *New Internationalist* magazine titled its November 2001 issue 'Twin Terrors' to remind us that terror is manifested in more ways than are captured by the term 'terrorism'. *New Internationalist* quotes a passage from Mark Twain which, when combined with some quantification of 'enduring terrors', puts the loss of 7,000 or more lives in the US on 11 September into a different perspective from that portrayed in mainstream media:

## TWO TERRORS

There were two 'Reigns of Terror', the one wrought murder in hot passions, the other in heartless cold blood; the one inflicted death upon thousands of persons, the other upon hundreds of millions; but our shudders are all for the 'horrors' of the momentary Terror; what is the horror of swift death... compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty and heartbreak.

Mark Twain writing about the French Revolution in

*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* [c. 1899]

## ENDURING TERRORS

Number of people who died from hunger on 11 September 2001\*: **24,000**

Number of children killed by diarrhoea on 11 September 2001\*: **6,020**

Number of children killed by measles on 11 September 2001\*: **2,700**

\* Assuming annual deaths were evenly spread

Number of malnourished children in developing countries: **149 million**

Number of people without access to safe drinking water: **1,100 million**

Number of people without access to adequate sanitation: **2,400 million**

Number of African children under 15 living with HIV/AIDS: **1.1 million**

(*New Internationalist* November 2001: 18-19)

Later in September and early October 2001, the anthrax 'attacks' in the US were enthusiastically mimicked as a popular (and by South African standards non-violent) mode of monkey-wrenching until the government legislated heavy fines on anyone caught perpetrating an anthrax hoax.

I realise that invoking the *Tampa* incident and the events of September 11 are in danger of becoming merely gestural, but the fallout from these events clearly presents us with

(re)new(ed) and urgent educational challenges. I do not think that it is any exaggeration to say that we as a nation are now faced with an international cultural reconciliation agenda at a time when we have not advanced our homegrown reconciliation imperatives as far as we should.

In the next section of the paper, I present a slightly updated extract from an essay I wrote nearly two years ago (Gough 1999b) in which I responded to my perceptions of silences around questions of race and gender among southern African environmental educators. The remainder of the paper explores conceptual and methodological issues of local knowledge production in a global economy of knowledge circulation.

### **A travelling textworker's dilemma: troubling epistemological racism**

During 1998 and 1999 I participated (with five other Australian academics) in an institutional links project funded by the Australian federal government to support environmental education in six South African universities and colleges. I was specifically involved in activities intended to enhance research capacity in environmental education, with particular reference to appropriate methodologies and supervision practices. During 2000 and 2001 I collaborated in a number of other research and graduate program development initiatives focussed on educational leadership, multicultural education and curriculum inquiry at two South African universities. This work has provided me with opportunities to pursue my research interests in the internationalisation and globalisation of curriculum work in a different location from my usual worksite. In particular, my encounters with the many and complex manifestations of difference, particularly but not only in southern Africa, have troubled and refined my own methodological dispositions and orientations to curriculum inquiry.

Working with historically disadvantaged peoples and institutions in South Africa has given me some new standpoints for understanding how the term 'research' is linked inextricably to European imperialism and colonialism. Indeed, 'research' is one of the dirtiest words in the vocabularies of people who have been on the suffering and subjugated side of history. As writes:

When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, [the word 'research'] stirs up silence, it conjures bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful... The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends our deepest sense of our humanity. Just knowing that someone measured our 'faculties' by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations.

Research practices in South Africa were for many years used to support the racist policies of the apartheid state. For example, as points out, the results of psychological testing, specifically IQ tests, were used as evidence of the superiority of whites over blacks, to deny blacks access to education and economic resources, and to justify the exploitation of black labour. Thus, postcolonialist thinking initially informed my work in South Africa in two ways: first, I wanted to work with South African colleagues to 'decolonise' the dominant research

practices and educational discourses that were sedimented in the nation's history of colonisation and institutionalised racism and, secondly, I wanted to subvert the possibility that I might myself be complicit in a neocolonialist project. In regard to the second purpose, I intentionally refused the role of 'helper' to which the project implicitly assigned me (it was explicitly an 'aid' project). Instead, I tried to heed the advice of Lila Watson, an Australian Aboriginal educator and activist, who is reported as saying, 'If you've come to help me you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together' (quoted in . I hoped that the desire to decolonise our respective local discourses of environmental education research would be a shared emancipatory project that would allow Australians and South Africans to work together in mutually supportive and rewarding ways, rather than positioning one party as 'helping' the other.

Following suggestion that qualitative inquiry involves 'fieldwork, headwork, and textwork', I unabashedly position myself as a textworker (and more recently, with tongue only slightly in cheek, a *travelling* textworker) because I privilege narrative and textuality in the ways I represent and perform educational inquiry. My methodological disposition is to assume, as puts it, that 'the world is a text that is read, and our interpretation of our world is a function of our reading of texts'. I am thus interested in what we can learn by generating our own stories of educational experience, by thinking about educational problems and issues as stories and texts, and by subjecting all the stories and texts we encounter in our work to various forms of narrative and textual analysis, critique and deconstruction. What this means in my own practice is that I am disposed to pay close attention to gaps and silences in the stories I read and hear, and to identify what each story disregards, marginalises, suppresses and/or treats as unimportant.

A narrative perspective on research also draws attention to the embodied and socially located character of knowledge construction. Stories are fashioned by *somebody, somewhere*. This is particularly significant for a travelling textworker, because stories may be told and received differently when they are dislocated from the places in which their meanings are initially shaped. Until relatively recently in human history, the social activities through which distinctive forms of knowledge are produced have been localised. The knowledges generated by these activities have thus borne what calls the idiosyncratic 'cultural fingerprints' of the times and places in which they were constructed. For example, the knowledge that the English word 'science' usually signifies was uniquely coproduced with industrial capitalism in seventeenth century northwestern Europe. The internationalisation of what we now call 'modern Western science' was enabled by the colonisation of other places in which the conditions of its formation could be reproduced.

The global reach of US and European imperialism has given Western modes of knowledge production the *appearance* of universal truth and rationality, and they often are assumed to lack the cultural fingerprints that seem much more conspicuous in 'indigenous' knowledge systems that have retained their ties to specific localities. But, as writes, the universal/local dichotomy is misplaced when applied to Western and indigenous knowledge systems, 'because the western is a local tradition which has been spread world wide through intellectual colonisation'. One sign of intellectual colonisation is what call the 'unmarked category'. For example, in the informational domains of the Internet, US addresses are unmarked but every other country is identified by the final term: au for Australia, sg for Singapore, za for South Africa, and so on. Unmarked cultural categories, such as whiteness in most Western countries, are especially troublesome for those of us who reside within them because they designate power and privilege. In discussing 'blackness' and 'whiteness' in literary studies asserts that:

To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body.

This dilemma is amplified in multiracial, multi-ethnic South Africa. For example, in my initial work in South Africa my closest colleagues were two isiZulu-speaking blacks, two English/Afrikaans-speaking whites, an English-speaking 'coloured' and an English-speaking 'Indian' (both of whom preferred to identify themselves as blacks).

The invisibility of whiteness to those of us who are white is at the heart of a recent debate about racism in educational research (see, for example, . Scheurich and Young (1997) outline four levels of racism: individual, institutional, societal, and civilisational. Racism in countries such as the US (and, by implication, Australia) is seen primarily as an individual phenomenon. That is, when we deny that we are racist we mean that we, as individuals, do not consciously have a negative judgment of another person based on their membership of a particular race. Scheurich and Young (1997: 5) argue that 'this individualized, conscious, moral or ethical commitment to antiracism is a significant and meaningful individual and historical accomplishment', but that it 'restricts our understanding of racism to an individualized ethical arena' and is, therefore, 'a barrier to a broader, more comprehensive understanding of racism'. This is not, of course, news to my South African colleagues, all of whom have personally experienced in some way the effects of institutional and societal racism. But in the US and Australia, educational researchers have (and in some cases still do) use labels such as 'culturally deprived' or concepts such as 'at risk' or 'dysfunctional' to describe non-white students, reflecting an institutionalised racism through these entrenched (unmarked, invisible) organisational symbols and knowledges. On a broader social scale, entire societies may exhibit practices where one race is favoured or disadvantaged in relation to another, as in South Africa under apartheid. Societal racism persists in more subtle ways in countries like the US and Australia, where the dominant culture's social and historical experiences (such as the white middle class view of 'success') are reproduced by the media, legal practices and government programs, through a selective privileging of particular meanings of, say, a 'good leader' or a 'functional family'.

Scheurich and Young (1997: 7-8) argue that civilisational racism exists at the deepest (and least conscious) level because privileged attitudes towards and beliefs about the nature of reality and the construction of knowledge are naturalised to the extent that they become everyday practical realities for the entire population, even though these attitudes and beliefs have been constructed historically by the dominant societal group. provides a compelling example of civilisational racism in his depiction of how 'the West' constructed and legitimated its ideas about 'the Orient' not only to Europeans but also to 'Orientals' themselves. Epistemological racism arises at this fourth level when the social history of a particular group is privileged over others and their epistemic view of the world becomes dominant. Scheurich and Young (1997: 8) argue that 'all of the epistemologies currently legitimated in [Euro-American] education arise exclusively out of the social history of the dominant White race' and, thus, that this unduly restricts the range of possible epistemologies available to us, and makes non-dominant constructions of knowledge suspect, pathological, sensational, or simply illegitimate.

I find much of Scheurich and Young's argument very persuasive, although I also see several difficulties in taking up their position. For example, suggests that their view tends to 'essentialize the construct of race'. raises some more awkward questions: 'How would one bring on a charge of epistemological racism? Under what circumstances? How can we claim to know epistemological racism when we read it?' Mackwood points out that while Scheurich and Young use Said's (1978) *Orientalism* as an example of reading epistemological racism, they do not address an important methodological question raised by his attempt to reveal

how colonial European epistemology created 'the Orient' as an object for cultural appropriation and domination. In contrast to Scheurich and Young's (1997: 10) call to 'develop, and apply, "new" race-based epistemologies', Said refuses to offer an alternative to Western representational practices, because this would mean accepting 'the Orient' as a 'real' object rather than as a fiction created to convince the West of its own supremacy. But, as Mackwood (1999: 2) argues, the difficulty with Said's approach is 'the methodological question of how he purports to separate himself from the dominant white racist epistemologies he claims (and Scheurich and Young claim) are so pervasive'. In other words, is there anywhere 'outside' of epistemological racism that we can stand to examine it?

These are troublesome questions for an anti-racist, anti-imperialist travelling textworker. My concern is not that I might 'import' racist epistemologies into South Africa (there is ample evidence that nations in periods of postcolonial transition need no outside assistance or encouragement in taking up the epistemologies of their former oppressors, sometimes with great enthusiasm) but, rather, that the methodologies and critical strategies that I use to deconstruct the false claims of 'universal' knowledges in the more familiar settings of my work may produce further distortions when deployed in South Africa.

### **Global knowledge economy/local knowledge spaces**

I have written elsewhere about the effects of globalisation and internationalisation on local knowledge production (see . Here it will suffice to note that in working with South African colleagues I (and they) found it helpful to follow in adopting a position that understands all knowledge traditions as being spatial in that they link people, sites and skills. Turnbull's approach is to recognise that all knowledge systems (including Western science) are sets of local practices so that it becomes possible to 'decentre' them and develop a framework within which different knowledge traditions can equitably be compared rather than absorbed into an imperialist archive.

Through a number of detailed case studies, Turnbull (1997) demonstrates that such achievements as gothic cathedral building, Polynesian navigation, modern cartography, *and* modern (Western) science are, in each case, better understood performatively—as diverse combinations of social and technical practices—than as results of any internal epistemological features to which 'universal' validity can be ascribed. The purpose of Turnbull's emphasis on analysing knowledge systems comparatively in terms of spatiality and performance is to find ways in which diverse knowledge traditions can coexist rather than one displacing others. He argues that nourishing such diversity is dependent on the creation of 'a third space, an interstitial space' in which local knowledge traditions can be 'reframed, decentred and the social organisation of trust can be negotiated'. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah (1990:122) and Edward Soja (1996) name the space that Turnbull envisages as a 'third space', whereas Homi Bhabha (1994: 312) calls it 'an interstitial space'—a space created through 'negotiation between spaces, where contrasting rationalities can work together but without the notion of a single transcendent reality' (Turnbull 2000: 228). The production of such a space is, in Turnbull's (1997: 560-1) view, 'crucially dependent' on 'the reinclusion of the performative side of knowledge':

Knowledge, in so far as it is portrayed as essentially a form of representation, will tend towards universal homogenous information at the expense of local knowledge traditions. If knowledge is recognised as both representational and performative it will be possible to create a space in which knowledge traditions can be performed together.

Turnbull invites us to be suspicious of importing and exporting representations that are disconnected from the performative work that was needed to generate them. If we think about coproducing knowledge in 'interstitial' transnational spaces, it becomes clear that some of the most revered processes of Western knowledge production will not necessarily appear to be trustworthy. For example, many of the truth claims that constitute Western knowledge are produced under laboratory conditions. However, as argues, developing 'methodological strategies for... global thinking' requires a more 'naturalized' epistemology than laboratory work assumes:

I maintain that the laboratory is neither the only nor the best place for epistemologists to study 'natural' human knowing in order to elaborate epistemologies that maintain clearer continuity with cognitive experiences—'natural knowings'—than orthodox *a priori*-normative epistemologies do. I advocate turning attention to how knowledge is made and circulated in situations with a greater claim to the elusive label 'natural.' My interests are in ways of gathering empirical evidence and in assumptions about the scope of evidence as it plays into regulative theories. My contention, briefly, is that evidence gathered from more mundane sites of knowledge production can afford better, if messier, starting points for naturalistic inquiry than much of laboratory evidence, for it translates more readily into settings where knowing matters in people's lives and the politics of knowledge are enacted.

For example, despite claims for the 'objectivity' of experimental methods, the methodological principle of controlling variables produces knowledge that can be incomprehensible in locations where this principle is not taken for granted. Again, as Code (2000: 71) notes: 'Descriptions, mappings, and judgments that separate evidence from extraneous "noise" are always value-saturated, products of some one's or some group's location and choice; hence always contestable'.

### **Methodological implications**

In light of the above considerations, I suggest that doing educational inquiry internationally might best be understood as a process of creating transnational 'spaces' in which scholars from different localities collaborate in reframing and decentering their own knowledge traditions and negotiate trust in each other's contributions to their collective work. For those of us who work in Western knowledge traditions, a first step must be to represent and perform our distinctive approaches to educational inquiry in ways that authentically demonstrate their localness. This may include drawing attention to the characteristic ways in which Western genres of academic textual production invite readers to interpret local knowledge as universal discourse.

For example, in their chapter on 'Understanding curriculum as international text,' Pinar et al. (1995: 793-4) begin a section dealing with research perspectives and paradigms by asserting that: 'Studying curriculum internationally is conducted in seven different traditions of research'. The traditions they list include descriptive, analytical, interpretive, evaluative, predictive, organizational, and theoretical studies. They conclude by stating that 'The diversity of research orientation and of theme underline the complexity of understanding curriculum internationally'.

The authors' declarative and generalized mode of address occludes the local (and even parochial) character of their assertions. The authors are speaking principally for US and Canadian scholars and almost exclusively for those who work in Eurocentric traditions. The research orientations and themes they list are a 'diversity' only within Western registers of difference in approaches to disciplined inquiry (for example, they are limited to the exoteric interests that motivate most Western researchers rather than also including the more

esoteric interests of many non-Western and indigenous scholars). The seven traditions listed by Pinar et al. (1995) seem less diverse when they are compared with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999: 142-60) list of twenty-five indigenous research practices: claiming, testimonies, story telling, celebrating survival, remembering, indigenizing, intervening, revitalizing, connecting, reading, writing, representing, gendering, envisioning, reframing, restoring, returning, democratizing, networking, naming, protecting, creating, negotiating, discovering, and sharing. Of course, these lists are not strictly comparable, although some of the items in Smith's list suggest silences in Pinar et al's (1995). For example, where are the critical-emancipatory studies suggested by terms such as celebrating survival, intervening, revitalizing, restoring, returning, democratizing, and protecting? Are these subsumed under one or more terms in Pinar et al's (1995) list? (The examples listed for each category do not suggest that this is the case.)

The more important question that arises from juxtaposing Pinar et al's (1995) seven traditions of studying curriculum internationally with Smith's twenty-five indigenous research practices is to ask how the types of curriculum work that each set of practices represents might be performed together in the same transnational knowledge space. Here we must heed Turnbull's cautions about adopting an overly representational view of knowledge, with the attendant risks of homogenizing and universalizing different knowledge traditions. But performing both local knowledge traditions together seems more likely to provide opportunities for the mutual recognition of performative equivalences and develop the capacity for new 'transnational' knowledge to be coproduced in the space. For example, Pinar et al. (1995: 793) exemplify analytical studies 'that seek to specify cause-and-effect relationships' by reference to 'a study of the educational remnants of colonialism in the Pacific Islands'; Smith (1999: 148) illustrates the project of 'connecting' by reference to 'connecting people to their traditional lands through the restoration of specific rituals and practices'. Let us imagine that these two projects are quite literally being performed in the same space: a doctoral student from a US university is pursuing the analytic project on the same Pacific island as another doctoral student from the International Research Institute for Maori and Indigenous Education at the University of Auckland (Aotearoa/New Zealand). Both researchers are interested in analyzing the educational remnants of colonialism but the University of Auckland student is also a member of the island's indigenous community and wants her research to go beyond analysis to include a restorative dimension. If these researchers choose to work together, and if Turnbull's analysis of knowledge systems in terms of spatiality and performance is warranted, their most constructive achievements will arise from negotiated co-performances—from messy, contingent, unplanned combinations of their social and technical practices—as they struggle to find ways in which their different local knowledge traditions (respectively Western and hybrid Western/indigenous) can coexist.

I have had sufficient personal experience of attempting to produce such transnational spaces in South Africa to admit that 'struggle' is much too weak a term for the effort that working in this way demands, but I also have experienced the ambiguous and humbling pleasures that have made the effort worthwhile (see, for example, .

Might being attentive to epistemological racism and to the production of transnational spaces for knowledge work take us any closer to the types of local and global cultural reconciliation that many of us desire? I have no 'conclusions' to offer here, merely cautions. We may not be able to speak—or think—from outside our own Eurocentrism and whiteness, but we can continue to ask questions about how our specifically Western ways of working locally in educational inquiry might be performed with other local knowledge traditions in educational work. By coproducing educational inquiry in transnational spaces, we can, I believe, help to make both the limits and strengths of Western and other epistemologies and methodologies increasingly visible.

## References