Methodology and Interpretive Procedures in Educational Research: risk, imagination and reflexivity

Abstract
‘Methodology and Interpretive Procedures’ acknowledges the vital importance of methodology as I construct a discourse that examines discourses. Through Ball (1994) this paper considers methodological terms such as critical, analyst, risk, imagination, reflexive and reflective. Accepting that the naming of any field is contestable therefore risky, the educational field of focus is ‘the arts’. The discussion raises questions about institutional thought, organisational limits, and ways of analysing the discursive practices of which Michel Foucault speaks. Also raised are political issues surrounding the constitution of knowledge, including normalising assumptions in discourses of art education, as I seek a Nietzschean historical sense in educational research through a demystification of poststructuralist theories within applied fields of educational practice.

Outlining the Terrain
The critical analyst must take risks, use imagination, but also be reflexive
(Stephen Ball, 1994: 2).

Stephen Ball (1994: 2) speaks of a methodological aim for the critical analyst – to analyse, take risks, and be imaginative and reflexive when interrogating a field of knowledge. Ball uses these terms in context of the political economies of ‘market reforms’ in educational modes of policy and practice. My engagement with these terms is in the field of ‘the arts’ in educational research.

This paper acknowledges the vital importance of methodology as I construct a discourse that examines discourses. The approach to methodology in any research project discloses the approach to ‘knowledge’, and therein lies the knowledge-politics through which the field of interest may be adduced. Posing some research examples in the educational field of ‘the arts’, particularly visual arts, and engaging the field through poststructuralist methodologies, the discussion scrutinises the terms used by Ball: critical, risk, imagination, reflexive. The procedure undertaken has inherent risks tracing through it. In foregrounding poststructuralism and the arts I am acknowledging the risk of ‘naming’ educational/research/cultural/political arenas that are both marginalised and profiled at one and the same time; they are both given undue attention in educational debates as they are both silenced. From what ‘ground’ does the attention or silencing speak? That is the acute angle of my interest. Naming and categorisations, in themselves, serve to demarcate boundaries, borders and limits; they lend order, tidy-up, offer seeming clarity to a social, educational or political situation. Thus, as much as raising questions about ‘the arts’ in education as a research field, this paper also raises questions about institutional thought, organisational limits, and ways of archiving and analysing the discursive formations of which Michel Foucault speaks (see in particular Foucault, 1994: 31-39). Also raised are political issues surrounding the constitution of knowledge in educational practice and research, including normalising assumptions in dominant discoursal practices, as I seek a Nietzschean historical sense to the present terrain of ‘the arts’ in education.

Research Projects
My particular field of research is the arts in education, or particularly visual arts, otherwise known as fine arts or art. However, from this specific field my comments apply to a wider field of educational discourse wherein the disciplines are undergoing transformations as interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary modes of enquiry reshape the borders of institutional practice. This endeavour seeks to reveal something of the problematic area in which ‘the arts’ are situated in both practice-based and theoretical arenas, as I construct a discourse that examines discourses. Making possible such a deconstructive approach is a range of methodological or theoretical procedures known as ‘poststructuralism’. Thus, one of the main aims of my research is to raise questions about ways of analysing discursive formations in the practices of visual arts education through the application of poststructuralist theories and methods. Throughout education, in policy and practice, dominant forms of institutional thought are normalised and legitimised through the agency of use, or they may be politically inscribed to appeal to the Western metanarrative defining structures and foundational discourses of progressive reason, betterment and progress. However, the purpose of this paper is not to undertake a deconstruction of the foundations of those discoursal conditions but to engage critically with the methodological procedures whereby such a deconstruction might take place.
This approach has sustained my work in art education over many years including my doctorate research *The Politics of Knowledge: A Poststructuralist Approach to Visual Arts Education in Tertiary Sites* (Grierson, 2000). This project brought a focus to the methodologies of which this paper is concerned, in particular the field of visual arts education. Questioning the politics of knowledge in institutional practices, dominant principles are disclosed in the discursive formations of visual arts education, historically and in the present. The research was grounded in philosophies and pedagogical practices of the first visual arts degree in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Bachelor of Visual Arts, tracing its move through three very different institutional sites: Australasia’s first Art Society (Auckland Society of Arts), Auckland’s oldest Polytechnic (Auckland Institute of Technology), and New Zealand’s newest University (Auckland University of Technology). Through poststructuralist theories/methods the research opened for interrogation questions of judgement and processes of the legitimation of knowledge in policy and pedagogical practice. The project engaged with institutional premises and assumptions in historical and contemporary discourses of tertiary education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, asking questions of the defining structures and practices that register difference, a cultural and political need, within those discourses.

Other recent research projects have interrogated and deconstructed epistemological foundations of institutional practice in visual arts – studio and art history/theory – engaging particularly with a poststructuralist critique of propositional meaning, aesthetics and the metaphysical foundations of the liberal subject in the art educational setting (see Grierson, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Research on arts’ curriculum policy and practice is available in *The Arts in Education: Critical Perspectives from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Grierson and Mansfield, 2003a), which illuminates the way knowledge is constituted through the arts in education. Critical attention is paid to the politics of signification in educational policies and practices, specifically those which comprise the discourses of visual arts, music, dance and drama, collectively ‘named’ by the new curriculum as ‘the arts’. Attention is given to the application of particular rules of judgement that constitute a legitimating or de-legitimating set of practices, with the acknowledgment that by such means a particular subject or object of interest will be foregrounded, represented, reproduced and inscribed in educational discourses. Through curriculum policy and practice political implications are raised within social, cultural, and philosophical dimensions – and the rules of construction upon which those discourses are founded are scrutinised.

Fazal Rizvi (1994) makes clear the profound importance of bringing a deconstructive eye to the arts in education. Rizvi speaks of the repetition of an attitude towards ‘the arts’ whereby they are regarded by educators in ‘a culturally blind manner’ or ‘neutral with respect to particular values they might embody or express’ (1994: 55). I would like to reinforce this point. The regard of the arts as politically neutral is endemic to the ‘new age’ of ‘creative industries’ (see Grierson, 2003c) where the arts are politically reinvested with a heady concept of progress, suggesting the Enlightenment metanarrative in new guise.

**Poststructuralism and Deconstruction**

‘Poststructuralism offers very different ways of looking at and beyond the obvious and puts different sorts of questions on the agenda for change’, said Ball (1994: 2). Knowledge acquisition and development is all about interpretation in that we, the learner/participant/observer/agent/teacher, interpret what we do, see and hear, even as it is being enacted. In such practices Foucault draws our attention to relationships of power and knowledge and how they operate through the discursive formations of institutional discourses. The praxes of institutionalised thought and action are thereby disclosed. This sort of engagement enables analysis of thought, languages and actions within social institutions, which prioritise some modes of thought and practice while disallowing others. Through normalised rules and conditions of self-reflective practice (a-politicised, assumed and unspoken, even as they are reproduced) our knowledge is legitimated, and claims that we might be present before such knowledge are formulated and cemented as ‘fact’ or ‘the way it is’.

**Deconstruction** as ‘a way of reading’ provides strategies for the researcher to critique, contest, question and displace binary positions upon which such ‘facts’ are formulated and valued, such as the authenticity of the liberal/rational subject, judgements of taste and their partnership with morality, aesthetics and its partnership with higher truths, and cultural authorship and its claim on identity formation. The aim is not one of the destruction of long-held values or traditions (which is often the criticism levied against deconstruction and poststructuralism) but of deconstruction whereby the foundational assumptions of discourses are opened for scrutiny. Genres, conventions, and frontiers of practice may be then put into question, as the seemingly stable categorisations of art, identity and
subjectivity are rendered fragile – and no more so than in the present age of globalised technologies of new media with the proliferation of information and the folding of ‘knowledge’ into an economic, futurist model.

Deconstruction, to draw from Booker’s (1999: 63) useful explanation, is a ‘critical attitude or way of reading’; and as Derrida (1978: 282) shows, ‘it is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself’. The heritage, in the case of the arts, is one that is well and truly steeped in the metaphysical ground of liberal, humanist aesthetics, and rationalist discourses, through which the humanist academies of fine arts, for example, have been founded.

A Critical Approach

‘The twenty-first century has seen a shift from thinking about the art object as a discrete bearer of meaning or truth of the visible world, to seeing the image, object or artefact as a signifier of multiple meanings situated in the multidimensional social, cultural and political domains of a global world’ (Grierson, 2003a). In the chapter ‘Framing the Arts in Education: What is Really at Stake?’ (in Grierson and Mansfield, 2003a) I discuss the question of criticality in curriculum policy and practice, with particular reference to The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2000) (see also Grierson and Mansfield, 2003b). New policies and practices are opening the need for more, not less, critical enquiry in the research field of art education. There is much to be done. The critical approach to curriculum policy, design and practice spoken of here, opens spaces of knowledge beyond binary prescriptions and categories to the investigation of structures, subjectivities, and disciplinary processes which provide the legitimating conditions of knowledge in institutional settings.

By critical practice I mean attention to the cultural, social, economic and political practices which throw light on the ways power relations may be constituted, reproduced, or resisted as part of the social; and how ‘art’ (whatever ‘art’ may or may not be) may be constituted, considered and legitimated within social relations and institutional systems; and how the politics of signification may be understood through educational policy and practice. Subjects of education (human subjects and disciplinary subjects of knowledge) are constituted through what is said and what is done in the name of education.

In his statement about risk, imagination and reflexivity at the start of this paper, Stephen Ball (1994: 2) uses the term critical in respect of an analyst – one who maps and analyses the discourses of the terrain under scrutiny through looking at and assessing the particular conditions of policy and practice through which present political conditions are framed, providing a plan for strategic developments in the future. A critical approach to such a move involves an active engagement with risk, imagination and reflexivity. Through these means the discursive processes are identified and analysed through a critical process of investigation, with the aim, in terms of political analysis, to clarify the ways to move forward. In contemporary social and political analyses developed from critical theory, such as the work of German social theorist Ulric Beck (1992) and British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1994 with Beck and Scott; see also 1999), a form of critical analysis of the political conditions of globalisation is proposed whereby, as Booker (1999: 50) explains, ‘principles of modernity would be simultaneously critiqued and radicalized’ as a response to those new conditions. Thus an educational researcher might respond to the research field in much the same way with attention to the conditions of the past, to bring a critical understanding to the present. The difference would lie, as far as a poststructuralist approach is concerned, with the ‘new Left’s Third Way’ attention given to the future. Speaking poststructurally, rather than the heady emphasis on futurist predictions and framing, the focus must be on the visible and non-visible, permitted and omitted, legitimated and delegitimated heritage of tracing the discourses of the present. If educational research aims to understand the present conditions better and enable a transformative action of the present to take place then research must adopt a method whereby this is possible and a critical history of the present can be made visible (see Nietzsche, 1997; original 1874).

Michel Foucault has traced a method of accessing and constructing history from Nietzsche’s discourses. Peters (1999: 2) points out that Foucault’s ‘Archaeology’ was raising questions about the ‘epistemological mutation of history’ calling on ‘the Nietzschean genealogy which asks the search for origins and foundations’. Peters cites Rabinow (1997) who explains that Foucault’s work on the history of systems of thought was divided into three parts: the ‘reexamination of knowledge, the conditions of knowledge, and the knowing subject’. Throughout my research on the arts in education, and visual arts in particular, a critical approach is taken to the analysis of each of these sites, and in
this sense the term critical comes from a Foucauldian formulation of archaeology and genealogy through which discourses might be accessed and analysed, which in turn comes from a Nietzschean call for critical history. As McHoul and Grace put it (1995: 27), ‘it is geared towards a counter-reading of historical and social conditions and offers possibilities for social critique and renewal’ (my emphasis).

**Risks**

Ball (1994: 2) claims ‘the critical analyst must take risks…’ Counter-readings are risky when dominant readings serve to reinvent, legitimate and reproduce social investments in certain practices. Poststructuralism produces counter-readings, so the researcher embarking on such practice may need a suit of armour fixed securely in place. Risks are taken through digging into the archives and opening the terrain for critical scrutiny. I use ‘archive’ in the Foucauldian sense, not solely as a body of empirical data but as a wider form of organisation of discourses such as the limits and forms of expressibility, memory, conservation and reactivation (Foucault, 1978: 14-15). According to Foucault (1977, in Bouchard, 1996: 199-204) such organisational limits and forms constitute discursive formations, and all discursive practices have historical specificity. Through the documentation of these formations, the aim is to build an anatomy of archives in institutional discourses of the arts in education, and thereby deconstruct the power/knowledge formulations. The archives are not merely the documents; they are the practices or conditions through which it is possible to ‘know’ something, or ‘not to know’ something, at a particular time and place, i.e. what is and is not said, what can and cannot be said. The multi-layered texts in the archives are indicative of multi-layered cultural, economic, political substrata through which power as a productive site constitutes knowledge – defining the ‘naming’ processes where, as Lewis Carroll said, ‘Things are seldom what they seem’.

Such imperatives offer a challenge to researchers. Risks and difficulties mark the contours of research in the arts, and ironically the greatest risk for the poststructuralist researcher, whose critical attitudes opens up too many concepts of truth that history happily closes down, is the risk of engaging with risk. The challenge is one of taking the first step to engage with poststructuralist discourses for the simple reason that they are highly appropriate to the complex task of untangling or teasing out the fragile tissues in the archives of the arts in education. The philosophical foundations upon which the disciplines are based will be engaged, and at the same time opened for scrutiny. The supplementary risk lies in applying and perpetuating a critical method of deconstruction, in its most robust repertoire, by continuing to ‘read’ the philosophical terrain ‘in a certain way’ which is what Derrida (1978: 288) advocates (cited in Booker, 1999: 63).

**Risks** are involved when questions are asked, which do not entertain a propositional logic or legitimated presupposition in their very framing. The action of dissecting institutional practices of art education may expose or disrupt the pedigrees of canonisation, and enduring hierarchisation of knowledge-systems, through which truth-claims of the liberal subject or the authenticity of aesthetic values may be confirmed and legitimated. Furthermore, in the field of educational research, so much attention has been paid, for so long, to research in literacy and numeracy, those guardians of the secret systems, through which truth claims of the liberal subject or the authenticity of aesthetic values may be confirmed and legitimated. Furthermore, in the field of educational research, so much attention has been paid, for so long, to research in literacy and numeracy, those guardians of the secret of progressive learning and advancement through which learners are marked and measured. So to declare oneself a researcher in ‘the arts’ or ‘art education’ or ‘visual arts’ is, in itself, a risky proposition. As New Zealand writer and critic, C. K. Stead wryly observes, ‘We get an agreement, a consensus about where we are and what’s right to say about it, and anybody who challenges that is not welcome. You don’t stand up in the dinghy’ (Stead, 2000: C8-9).

Underlying my research is the concern that so few researchers and educators in the arts ‘stand up in the dinghy’. In present constructions of art education in New Zealand I see little engagement with ‘art as a crucial site and strategic force’ (Giroux, 1999: ix), little perceived need for a critical approach to the politics of knowledge through the arts, diminishing debate on art as a political site, silencing of overt critiques of the liberal humanist subject (a form of subjectivity repeatedly reinscribed through ‘the arts’), and often glib acknowledgement of contingency and difference in the production of knowledge through pedagogical practices in the arts.

The combination of the arts and poststructuralism doubles the risk as it doubles the displacement from the dominant discourses, and it is from this doubly marginalised position that this paper speaks. Poststructuralist theories frequently attract battle at the interface with those liberal humanist proclivities that mark the probity of place and progression of incorporated knowledge. Methods of incorporation might change from context to context, rhetorical devices might portray seemingly different motivations, but premises of the need to incorporate knowledge into the ‘body politic’ propagate
pragmatic objectives through public rhetoric in the interests of consensual accounts of ‘truth’ that are embedded in empirical approaches to educational research when empirical accounts stem from, or are returned to the methodological certainties of propositional logic.

To the extent that poststructuralism offers a methodological procedure for opening up any field of knowledge to the interrogations of critical enquiry through deconstructive processes, it is important to reiterate that poststructuralism does not set out to destroy and eliminate the discourses within which it operates. It draws attention to the ontological foundations of the discourses while seeking to displace the metanarrative appeal to their foundational assumptions in social institutions, whereby certain practices are assumed, without examining the conditions of those assumptions, as ‘best practice’, ‘truthful’ or ‘correct’, and thereby legitimated, and other practices are simply rendered valueless, voiceless, and futile, or they are accepted but reinscribed and ‘given value’ through the defining structures of the dominant discourse. This happens constantly in the arts – and no more so than in the present conflation of ‘creative’ with ‘industry’ (see Grierson, 2003c). A deconstructive method sites the foundational assumptions of the field of enquiry and at the same time dis places those foundational assumptions through a Derridean ‘double play’. Thus traces of the foundations of the discourse may still be ‘read’ while at the same time they are put under erasure, to use the Derridean terms: a risky procedure that is exercised ‘in the service of life’ to use Nietzsche’s expression (Nietzsche, 1997: 75).

Imagination

How can movement and slippage occur in the episteme, or epistemological foundations of the arts? Following Ball (1994: 2) imagination proclaims a stake in this territory. The term imagination is yet another text in contention: a word used frequently with great ease and certainty when art and aesthetics are on the agenda, particularly by those who perceive that artists have a prior claim to knowledge via the power of imagination as an intuitive process. Such a claim has for centuries been premised on the notion that imagination must be privileged in the creative process, even if identifying the way this might happen is unclear. Imagination is a word, which claims consensual appeal, in relation to the feeling or sensuous aspects of making, reflecting upon, judging, or responding to works of art, aligned with reason through Kantian critiques. Imagination is a word which raises a raft of questions relating to the aesthetic experience, the primacy of feeling, the creative process, the nature of intuition, the notion of artistic activity, and relationships between thought, feeling, reason and perception.

A dictionary definition would show the origin of the word to be Latin imaginatio(n), from the verb imaginari ‘picture to oneself’, from imago, ‘image’. Self-reflective engagement is suggested thereby, through the process of picturing to oneself, rather like seeing with the mind’s eye. It may be assumed that the things or objects one pictures are not immediately available to the senses. In his Critique of Judgement (1790) Kant (1973: 58) identifies the role of imagination for bringing together the manifold of intuition, and understanding for the unity of the concept unifying the representations’. Imagination is deemed to be part of a process of fixing cognition which is a ‘universal communication’. However, when a Nietzschean and Foucauldian sense is engaged, imagination may be considered a mode of presenting whereby the Nietzschean will to power is induced and sustained (discussed further in Grierson, 2003c).

I suggest that what is required in researching the arts, and in particular the visual arts, is to constantly test the limits of the generally understood concept of imagination; open it like beauty to scrutiny through a deconstructive process, thereby testing its epistemological foundations across social, aesthetic and political fault-lines. The Nietzschean sense of discharge of force in life’s will to power is the thrust that makes the process of questioning and enquiring an unending impetus for the artist, as for the researcher or educator. Through deconstructive engagements with the present, I claim the necessity to be reflexive about what we do or do not do as educators, and why we do it or do not.

Reflexivity and Reflectivity

Reflexivity, a term which Beck (1992) introduces in respect of ‘reflexive modernization’ (see Brooker, 1999: 215), may open possibilities, albeit via the ravages of doubt, to engage with un-clarity and non-certainty, while it questions the premises of an argument, such as progressive accounts of the human subject through history, which are inherent in the political economies of the arts. Making a case for reflexivity in research practice, Frederick Steier (1995: 3) writes, ‘if we begin to examine how we as researchers are reflexively part of those systems we study, we can also develop an awareness of how reflexivity becomes a useful way for us to understand what others are doing’ (my emphasis). Steier claims that reflexivity is a way that ‘we contextually recognise the various mutual relationships in
which our knowing activities are embedded’ (1995: 163). However, the arts’ researcher must be aware that, with rhetoric like ‘embedded’ and ‘a turning back onto a self’ modernist tenets of Cartesian thought are invoked, through which, as Rodolphe Gasché (1986: 13) argues, ‘reflection shows itself to be primarily self-reflection, self-relation, self-mirroring’ in the Descartean sense of ‘the apodictic certainty of self’ as a result of the clarity and distinctness with which it perceives itself’ (my emphasis).

Gasché offers an investigative approach to the discourse of reflection beginning with, ‘Reflection is undoubtedly as old as the discourse of philosophy itself’ (13). Gasché is quick to point out that the philosophical concept of reflection is ‘a name for philosophy’s eternal aspiration towards self-foundation’ and that ‘only with modern philosophy – philosophical thought since Descartes – did reflection explicitly acquire this status of a principle par excellence’ (13). If the notion of reflexivity involves, as Steier said, ‘a turning back onto a self’, then reflexivity may engage the process of questioning the Enlightenment/modernist prioritisation of reflectivity, erasing it at the same time as acknowledging its pulsing course through the veins of metaphysical enquiry in the present.

Final Comments
Through highlighting poststructuralist methodologies this paper has constructed a discourse which examines discourses, and engages in a method which questions, albeit destabilises the assumed value of progressive enlightenment upon which Western knowledge systems are based, opening them ‘to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity’ (Foucault, 1994: 4). The research aims not to confirm the principle of coherence and continuity as a given, but to engage, even expect the disarming rights of discontinuity and difference in the promotion of transformative practices in education through research; not to seek the a priori locus of meaning as an essential method of consensual agreement among parties whose inclinations may be to disagree because they have no common basis upon which to settle agreement over the basic goals of knowledge (see Lyotard, 1988). If certainty, continuity and containment be the aim, then the researcher or art educator might claim the clarity of Enlightenment historiography, frame transcendental values and a universal teleological sense, and re-speak canons of progressive knowledge through what David Krell (1999: 12) calls ‘the epistemological labyrinth of modern subjectivist philosophy’ upon which the histories of art and education have been well founded. Such an approach, I venture to suggest, will easily overlook the criticality, risks, and imagination addressed through this paper.

Throughout my various research projects in the arts, questions of ontology and epistemologies of practice are raised, seeking always a critical approach to understanding present practices. The creative impetus is the desire to disclose and make visible the present contours of educational practice; particularly to reveal the power/knowledge relationships in the micro-politics of our social-institutional practices, with regard to the arts, subjectivity, global conditions, and the given weight of appeal to metaphysical foundations of meaning in education, evidenced in both policy and practice. My research is not dedicated to the detection and isolation of educational exemplars; it does not aim to put before the community an exemplary ‘teacher’, an exemplary ‘artwork’, an exemplary ‘practice’ or ‘belief’, for such would be at odds with the very methodologies and interpretive procedures it engages. Working critically and poststructurally through risks, imagination, and reflexivity, this particular paper has posed some questions and possible moves in the ‘game of analysis’ in educational arenas. Methodologically, it opens the discourses of knowledge to illuminate demarcations of pre-legitimated social and institutional ‘truths’, to isolate and map the fault-lines and slippages, cracks and crevices where counter-readings can occur. Poststructuralist theories and methods engage with those counter-readings, posing a critique of propositional meaning, and disrupting history’s heavy emphasis on the unitary human subject (of individualism) coursing through history as the agent of progressive betterment (of civilisation). Metaphysical foundations of epistemology and ontology are thereby interrupted via a radical critique in the present. Herein lies my methodology as an educator and researcher.

References


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1 A new curriculum for the arts in New Zealand schools has been published in two documents: *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* and *Ngā Toi i roto i te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 2000).


3 Methods of the historiography of art history as an academic discipline are discussed further in Grierson (2000, Chapter Six *Curriculum Sites*).