Readers, readers, writers and engineers

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> Knowledge, Power and Learning. Ed. Carrie Paechter, Margaret Preedy, David Scott and Janet Soler (pp180 + index). Paul Chapman Publishing (2001). ISBN 0-7619-6937-3.
> Learning, Space and Identity. Ed. Carrie Paechter, Richard Edwards, Roger Harrison and Peter Twining (pp181 + index). Paul Chapman Publishing (2001). ISBN 0-7619-6939-X.

Readers are important for a subject. As books, readers have something of the canon – those texts or ideas, ignorance of which would be embarrasing or disabling: there's much more to our subject than this, they say, but absorb these and you're one of us. They also represent the discipline in its interview suit, selected with care, ironed or carefully crumpled, grave, but hopefully elegant, too; and betraying all the anxieties of style, tone and suggestion which come with putting yourself on critical display. As people, readers are absolutely crucial to a discipline, since without them a subject is not a subject at all, but merely a group of letter-writing pals. Without readers, there is no need for a canon, a bibliography, or even a printer, since essays' functions are discharged as soon as they have helped their authors organise their ideas. These human readers are the ones looking over the discipline's CV and references. And so, Paechter et al. – did you have a good journey? – do tell us what you feel your discipline can bring to the academy.

> Both of these readers are part of the second level Open University course E211 *Learning Matters: challenges of the information age.* This is an innovative course, which looks at the impact of new technologies on learning throughout life and in a wide range of learning situations. (LSI, page ii, opposite title page)

This has a hint of the non-committal, but from the description of the course's content implied by Peter Twining in chapter 8 of *Learning, Space and Identity* (hearafter LSI), I get the impression the course team were happy to take an expansive view, and so the selection of readings in these two volumes seems to come from a broader range of educational theory than one tightly focused on technology.

I say 'seems', because I am not an educational theorist. I do some teaching, in the physical sciences, and I'd like to do that 'better', but this means I read this book from a practical standpoint – as a user of theory – rather than approach it as a connoisseur. I would like to teach better, and have no objections to having my notions of 'better' vigourously problematised; but I finish these books with my reflective practice completely unchallenged, and the only thing problematised being my notion of what educational theory is for. These readers do not bill themselves as practical guides, and I do not criticise them for not being so (they do not claim to be art books either, which is fortunate, since the page design and typesetting are deplorably amateurish).

Also, there is no problem with theoretical speculation, without which a discipline will shamble along in shallow valleys. The problem is with the apparently complete disconnection – the incommensurability – between the chalkface and the dominant discourse cleaved to by the majority of these readers' authors. Indeed chapters such as Carrie Paechter's *Schooling and the Ownership of Knowledge*, in chapter 12 of *Knowledge, Power and Learning* (hereafter KPL), can be read as straightforwardly antagonistic towards the teachers, who seem to be viewed as dupes when they are not collaborators.

We will return to this disconnection below, but let us first look at the way the cleavage manifests itself.

Consider Akosua Obuo Addo's and Soraya Shah's chapters (LSI chs. 4 and 10). These are straightforward accounts, mixed in each case with more theoretical remarks in a notably different prose-style. Addo describes the ways in which Ghanaian children teach singing games to each other and to adults, and brackets this with some theoretical remarks and conclusions which are only by implication tied to the central material. Shah's memoir describes the path a mature student takes through the racial, cultural and social maze of a UK degree course, also bracketing concrete description within theoretical material. Like Addo, she moves, over the course of the chapter, from a broadly passive to broadly active voice and back, and back and forth between knotted sentence structures and linear ones. The point here is not to criticise the prose style, the structural arch, or the personalia, but to wonder at the authority invested in a particular prose style, to the extent that authors feel compelled to use it, apparently in order to give their writing a dignity they worry it may not otherwise have.

Similar, but without the bracketing, is Roger Harrison's discussion of the effects of the recent focus on 'records of achievement' (LSI, ch 11). He describes the various policy forces and actors driving the institutional enthusiasm for self-determining, efficient, autonomous (and so on) learners. This is in a civil-service/managerial dialect which is unexciting, but information-rich and efficient. Then we spot the word 'humanistic' – oh no! Oh yes – by the end of this single disorienting paragraph we have rollercoastered into the same knotted dialect preferred by the majority of the theoretical authors in these two books. The style then stabilises towards a fairly central formal english.

What *is* this dialect, and what work is being done by its adoption?

The style is immediately familiar to anyone who has read any post-structuralist texts or other 'Theory' (not Theory Of anything, just, with a rather sinister imprecision, Theory). The style is impersonal, it abounds in noun-phrases, is polysyllabic, and passive (all vices of standard scientific writing); it is prone to sentences which grow out of the author's control, with subordinate clauses taking over, and main verbs drifting free; it is fond of lists which (a peculiar and irritating francophone tic) lack a final connective, leaving you guessing whether the items are alternatives, cumulative, evidence of chronic indecision: it looks unrevised. It is this last, and the uniformity of the style, that is key. The sentences don't radiate novelty, don't say that this is the first time this particular set of words has grappled itself onto the paper, or that the thought they spring from has never been thought before. They're like a Latin mass – the words are reassuring, mumbled and exclusive; and intelligible, surely, next chance you have to dig out your old primer.

There is only a poor analogy here, by the way, with the flat uniformity of the standard scientific style. That is a domain whose stylistic vices (one may profitably cite the passive voice addicted, long complicated noun-phrase using, shibboleth) practically define bad writing. But this scientific prose style is so ubiquitous that it confers only binary acceptability rather than authority, and since it is the only style that many scientific authors ever use, there can be no real significance (at this level) in their 'choosing' it. It is not even that this theoretical dialect is the obligatory central style for this discipline – as we have seen, authors are able to move between dialects at different points in their texts. The question then turns into this: at what points in their arguments do authors deploy this dialect?

Addo and Shah use it to frame their own observations (Addo's framing is arguably distinct in vocabulary and rhythm from the dialect in question, and so might be more an example of general register or code switching than the dominance of a particular dialect). Harrison chooses, consciously or not, to switch dialect at the point in his argument where his criticism begins; and it is significant that he is able to centralise his style as the chapter progresses, discounting the possibility that the ideas in question are representable *only* in this dialect. And Stephen Brookfield (LSI, ch 5) moves toward it when he enlarges his own described experience into general and possibly controversial claims. All four authors, that is, discipline themselves (or have been disciplined) to use this heightened style when they need to deploy some authority, even though they do their most effective and original work, in the chapters here, when they are speaking in their own voices.

I have picked on these four authors because (conveniently for my purpose) they switch in and out of this dialect. What, then, of the authors who remain in this dialect for their whole chapter? This means LSI chs 2 and 12, and KPL chs 1, 3, 4 and 12, with echoes of the style and preoccupations in several others. To me they are unfortunately rather interchangeable, and it can be difficult, opening the book at random, to recall which chapter I am looking at. They are generally concerned to apply Foucault's analysis of power to education, and very keen to deprecate what they find when they do so. Several carefully and pedantically introduce Foucault (I became heartily sick of that blasted Panopticon), and at least one even introduces the idea of the postmodern 'subject', though anyone innocent of these is sure to find much of the rest of the text very exotic indeed. That these authors pick on such elementary points for explanation suggests that they do not see the rest of their vocabulary, rhetoric and intellectual position as needing any sort of introduction at all – that they regard it as completely *normal*.

Is such a Foucauldean analysis possible? Manifestly. Is it interesting? Once or twice. Does it problematise education usefully? No, not really.

The chapter which most effectively undermines the claim of usefulness is Jennifer M Gore's *Disciplining Bodies: on the continuity of power relations in pedagogy* (LSI, ch 12). In it, Gore analyses in painstaking detail four broadly pedagogical situations, '…high school physical education classes with an explicit focus on bodies; a first-year teacher education cohort, working with three lecturers; a feminist reading group; and a women's discussion group that met for the purpose of intellectual stimulation' (p169). She is searching for explicit evidence of eight specified micro-practices of power, such as surveillance, normalisation, and the like. She finds that, rather contrary to expectation, 'the broad techniques used in the exercise of power relations were found in the radical and mainstream, and the institutionalized and non-institutionalized sites' (p177). We may take at face value her assertion (p169) that it was possible for her study *not* to find such a result, and thus that she has identified a real effect and not simply a construction of her own as a researcher (itself a rather surprising implicit claim in such company). Gore's conclusion is that this demonstrates the extent to which our various educational experiences discipline us, so that we automatically respond to such expressions of power, even in situations which only loosely resemble primary school. While I don't disagree with this, I don't think it's the end of the argument.

We may take that argument in two alternate directions. Firstly, we may deny that it was possible for her study to find any result other than this one, and conclude that Foucault has merely provided an alternative expression of what we can all understand in the societies around us: by being incapable of refutation, it adds nothing (this argument is devastating if you belive in Popper, rather less so otherwise).

Alternatively, we can say that the study does corroborate Foucault's analysis, but only by showing that these micro-practices of power are absolutely ubiquitous, so that even when the groups were self-consciously concerned to evade or modify such power relations, they failed to do so; it seems that some or other practices of power were necessary merely in order for the groups to function. This would appear to be

Foucault's position, if we put aside for the moment his claims' truth-creating aspects. This needn't be a pessimistic position; it might simply be a reasonably neutral observation of the world.

In either case, the Foucaultean analysis might change the way we reflect on social relations, or the way we respond in general to (what we now choose to identify as) practices of power – we resist or subvert. But while this *might* be enough for the sociologist or philosopher of education, for an educator it is inadequate where it is not pointless.

This is the location of the chasm here between the practice of education and its theorisation. On the one hand we find articles such as Chris Comber and Debbie Wall's *The classroom environment* (LSI, ch 7), which describes the complications of actually teaching actual people. Though the logistics of primary-school classrooms might not excite everyone, Comber and Wall's lightly theorised reflective practice appears to advantage in competition with the heavily theorised unpractice characteristic of much of the rest of the book. On the other hand we have Carrie Paechter's (KPL ch 12) rather fevered worries about how 'owned knowledge' (Good) is transformed into 'school knowledge' (Bad) as soon as the battle is won to bring it into the school. This vaguely paranoiac discussion is not so much about education as it is about utopian politics – it is not interested in teaching or learning, just in School.

My training, and the way I think of myself, is as a 'mathematical physicist'. This background is highly formal, usually abstract, and at times seems to be dizzyingly detached from any tangible laboratory. Yet I can call myself a physicist, and not a mathematician, for two reasons. The first is that my motivation is unequivocally the same as the most hard-headed experimenter – to understand the physical world – and I am in consequence obliged to concede that the most arcane theory is justified only by what an experimenter can ultimately do in a lab. The second is that between me and that hard-headed experimenter, or between me and an architect, is a continuity of discipline; a chain of possible conversations or subdisciplines, each one's practice the next one's theory; an interdisciplinary link which we might call, here, 'engineering'. Engineers are taught physics: they aren't expected to construct it, enjoy it, criticise it, or think about it very much, but they are expected to use it to make better decisions faster in their eventual practice. Bridges and buildings stay up because they are founded on a solid theoretical core which engineers have shaken out of physics, in the service of builders' and architects' impatient goals.

Now, education is not physics. It has different problems with evidence and reality, and its object of study is in different senses more and less intelligible; that is not the point. The point is that these two readers tell us that education theory lacks the justification that comes from a deep connection with practice, and either as a cause or as an effect, it also lacks the 'engineering' link between the theory that pulls it forward and shapes it, and the teaching practice that stops it simply blowing away. Bluntly, much of the writing in these two readers would be seen as pointless and silly by teachers and lecturers, if diligence or obligation had brought them here at all. This is not just the usual petty snobberies between disciplines: these teachers are doing the work the educational theorists claim to be studying, they wish (in the main) to do it better, and they can reasonably expect the theorists to have something to say on the subject. These practitioners are the builders, and they want the engineering confidence the theorists are disinclined to provide.

This brings us back to the gulf between, not just the prose styles, but also the preoccupations of the two strands of educational scholarship. One strand is a branch of the philosphy of sociology, wrangling with Foucault, aspiring to fit education into a larger theoretical project, and concerned with the construction (oppressive or otherwise) of the learner as postmodern subject. The second strand hopes to construct the learner as someone who knows more than they used to. It is this second, subaltern, strand that has the tougher time of it, deprived of much in the way of theoretical support (and what there is, represented by John Sloboda's, Michael Eraut's, and Pip Eastop's interesting chapters in KPL, chs 7–9, is focused more on skills training than

on education), and obliged to adopt the sociologists' idiom if they wish to make any more general claims. The sociologists appear never to adopt any of the practitioners' various idioms.

Not surprisingly, it is the few chapters in these readers which are perched precariously between the two strands which have the most valuable texts. Parenthetically, because they are in another world from the issues I am discussing, I can't not mention Seymour Papert's lucid and thought-provoking extract on *Personal Thinking* (LSI, ch 6), and Therese Jolliffe et al's luminous *Autism: a Personal Account* (LSI, ch 3), which does not have a great deal to do with education, but which could justify the book by itself.

Stephen Brookfield's *Through the Lens of Learning* (LSI, ch 5) is, I think, a key text, as it is a discussion of the author's equivocal unease at the relationship between theory and practice. Brookfield describes his discovery that his actual practice as a teacher, and expectation as a learner, was radically different from what he himself prescribed, and concludes that '. . . formal theory has an important contribution to make in helping to convert situationally specific, informal hunches into well-framed theories of practice.' (p 75). Above, I used this article as one of the examples of authors deploying the high-Theory style at crucial times, in Brookfield's case as he builds towards the most direct criticism of that theoretical approach, but we can also see the author's stylistic instability as echoing the theoretical (I nearly wrote theological) uncertainties he describes earlier in his chapter.

Peter Twining's *ICT and the Nature of Learning* (LSI, ch 8) describes the process of designing the OU course this reader accompanies. As is typical for OU authors, the writing is crafted, courteous and clear. Unlike Brookfield, Twining appears to enter the gap from the practical side, using theory to shape the practical design problems he has to solve, without particularly strong commitments to one approach or the other; as Brookfield wants, however, Twining uses theory to provide a vocabulary for thinking about learning. Importantly, it appears that neither author expects theory to *lead* him to a design solution, but instead to play a more passive rationalising role. Though very plausible, this ends up as a very modest role for an approach which, in numbers of articles and in the degree of rhetorical homage paid, one would expect to be more specifically creative.

The chapter which best exemplifies an 'engineering' approach is, I think, David Guile and Michael Young's *Apprenticeship as a Conceptual Basis for a Social Theory of Learning* (KPL, ch 5). This describes a specific theory of learning – in this case Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' – and confronts it with learners, in an exemplary way which grounds the theory and animates the practice.

If the supposition is true, at the beginning of this review, that these two readers can be regarded as representative of the discipline's aspirations, then it would seem that the discipline is in trouble – the interview has not gone well. Education theory is a ferment of ideas and terminology, and its products a maelstrom of humanistic subtlety, fascinating to its practitioners and possibly valuable therefore; but there seems no central theoretical core, not even a provisional one – no foundations on which to start engineering upper stories. What's worse, there's little evidence of even the *attempt* to shake out this core (the three chapters mentioned above are equivocal exceptions), and even possibly the claim that such a core would be impossible, or necessarily oppressive, to develop. But without that theoretical core, and built on it an engineering confidence which can generate usable educational designs, educational theory will never be any use.

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