Editorial

Leon Benade

New Zealand Tertiary College

Challenging the domestication of critical reflection and practitioner reflectivity

Critical reflection and practitioner reflectivity have assumed a status in educational discourse that merits some caution. Reflective practice discourses embedded in wider educational and professional discourses are often located in close relation to the demands and imperatives of 'twenty-first century learning' and demand that schools, teachers and curricula serve to ensure that students emerge from the schooling system with the competencies and values that will ensure their (economic) success in the future. This alignment domesticated critical reflectivity to a techno-instrumentalist view of schooling and education that has no intention of altering itself or its practitioners as a result of critical reflection.

The idea of reflective practice stems in part from thinkers such as Freire, who claimed that because of their human nature, people are able to step back from reality and reflect on it critically by problematising reality, and in this way 'enter into' reality to transform it. Crucial to problematisation is the ability and disposition to see the transformative power of cultural action, that is, the world does not appear naturally but usually as a result of some other cause (Freire, 1973).

Max von Manen distinguished this view of critical reflection as the 'highest level of deliberative rationality' (1977, p. 227), which describes practice of a particular kind. Following a Habermasian construction of critical theory, von Manen described the outcome of such critical reflective practice as '[u]niversal consensus, free from delusions or distortions…that pursues worthwhile educational ends in self-determination, community, and on the basis of justice, equality, and freedom' (1977, p. 227). In contrast, von Manen described two lesser levels of reflectivity. An interpretive level, where the inquirer's own values prejudices, experiences and background influences are brought under critical scrutiny, (1977, p. 226), and at the lowest level, is technical rationality, where 'the practical refers to the technical application of educational knowledge and of basic curriculum principles for the purpose of attaining a given end' (1977, p. 226).

There is good reason for developed states to promote the high-level dialectical or dialogical, problem-posing enquiry described by von Manen and Freire. Such enquiry strives for enhanced practitioner self-knowledge, practitioner communal knowledge, and enhanced student experience of school. The reason, it may be suggested, is the growing racial, cultural and gendered diversity and heterogeneity of the student body in developed states, which continues to be taught by a teaching profession that is largely homogeneous (i.e. white middle-class and female) (Howard, 2003). Large segments of that student body are increasingly marginalised and alienated by their schooling experience. In the New Zealand context, the reality of thriving student diversity was acknowledged by *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling* (Alton-Lee, 2003), an early example of the flagship Best Evidence meta-research of the Ministry of Education. Although the likely impact of this diversity (and the unresponsiveness of a homogeneous teaching force) on student achievement was also acknowledged, Russell Bishop (2003) articulated the point more

forcefully by arguing from a *Kaupapa Māori* theoretical perspective that dominant (white) ways of knowing, teaching and relating are instances of powerful privilege and dominance that have to be acknowledged by the holders of that power. Such dominance creates asymmetries of the kind that von Manen believed can only be challenged by dialogical, problem-posing deliberative reflectivity.

'Māori, Pasifika, learners from low socio-economic areas and learners with special education needs, on average, continue to achieve at lower levels than their peers' (Ministry of Education, 2010). High rates of academic failure among the poor and dispossessed are echoed in the United States of America (Howard, 2003) and Australia (Zubrick S.R., 2006). Like Bishop, Howard argues however that marginalised students bring their own unique cultural capital to school, and it is the responsibility of teachers to positively and critically address these differences. For Howard, '[c]ritical reflection should include an examination of how race, culture, and social class shape students thinking, learning, and various understandings of the world' (2003, p. 197). What likelihood is there of these goals being advanced in contemporary schools? Surely the focus on the demands of the twenty-first century ought to make the value of such deep teacher critical reflection desirable?

Teacher reflection in *The New Zealand Curriculum*

The New Zealand Curriculum presents 'Teaching as Inquiry' as a characteristic of effective pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 35). It consists of three separate processes: 'focusing inquiry', 'teaching inquiry' and 'learning inquiry', which engage teachers in asking what their students need to know, what the strategies are whereby teachers can attain these learning goals, and whether these strategies have been effective in enabling students to learn.

Teachers are advised to decide on evidence based strategies (2007, p. 35). Vaguely, 'the teacher uses evidence from research and their [sic] own past practice'. Teaching success (presumably the methodology or strategies) is gauged by reference to 'prioritised outcomes, using a range of assessment approaches'. These outcomes will have been determined in the first phase when the teacher asks: 'What is important (and therefore worth spending time on), given where my students are at?' (2007, p. 35). It is thus self-evident that it is individual classroom teachers reflecting over matters strictly limited to them and their classrooms individually, thereby deepening the privatisation of teaching. The teaching inquiry confirms the only matter of importance to be a technical-functionalist question of whether teachers can engineer the methods appropriate to ensure that their students attain at or above the national norm. The learning inquiry confirms the narrowness of assuming that the only learning occurring in a school is that taking place inside the classroom, in the context of transmission of content or programmes.

The narrow focus on impacts on student learning and form of questioning reveals that teaching as inquiry is epistemologically linked to positivism, endeavouring to separate facts from values, and disengaging the researcher from the researched, thus positing a value-free, neutral approach to social issues, education and politics. This approach is at best a recreation of the technical rationality identified by von Manen. The functionalism of teaching as inquiry places a singular focus on results gained from norm-referenced assessment as measures of whether teaching is effective or learning has occurred. Such an approach encourages the contemporary reductionist assumption that the problem of student underachievement can be 'fixed' by teachers closely adhering to lists of criteria of 'effective pedagogy'. It has a tendency to prioritise individual teacher effort and refuses to recognise the validity of a range of pressing socio-economic factors that influence student achievement which themselves

require a range of systemic responses beyond the scope of education. It also fails to develop in teachers a deeply held critically reflective attitude.

A recent national report of the Education Review Office (ERO) specifically highlighted the evidence of use by schools of teaching as inquiry (ERO, 2011). ERO justifies the place of this approach by referring to the work of Australian academic, Alan Reid: 'I understand inquiry to be a process of systematic, rigorous and critical reflection about professional practice, and the contexts in which it occurs, in ways that question taken-for granted assumptions. Its purpose is to inform decision-making for action' (Reid, 2004, p. 4 cited by by ERO, 2011, p. 25). However, this is a somewhat selective reference, as Reid goes on to say: 'Inquiry can be undertaken individually, but it is most powerful when it is collaborative. It involves educators … seeking answers to questions or puzzles that come from real-world observations and dilemmas'. (2004, p. 4). Subsequently, Reid makes it clear that teacher enquiry is not a thing that gets *done* by teachers, but rather is a *process* that includes critical dialogue, critical textual analysis and critical data analysis. These processes are strengthened considerably by engaging in these activities in community, and not largely individually, as suggested by *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

Positively, EROs findings of schools where teaching as inquiry was highly informative and supportive, discovered instances of teamwork, collaboration and sharing. Negatively, however, ERO seemed satisfied with a narrow focus on teaching and learning as evidenced through testing data, and the use of teacher appraisal/performance management system as a conduit for monitoring and developing teaching as inquiry (2011). Following Reid, this latter use of surveillance to monitor critical teacher reflection can be associated with what he terms a 'dominant, bureaucratic model', wherein 'superficial forms of external accountability… [encourage] educators to hide issues and problems, rather than discuss them openly...contribut[ing] to the privatisation of professional practice' (2004, p. 10).

An alternative: A Community of critical professional enquiry

A critical knowledge community requires a conception of the school as a community, rather than as a bureaucratic organisation (Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). This distinction is signalled by the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* theoretical framework postulated by Tönnies (cited by Strike, 2000), whereby community (*Gemeinschaft*) is a place of kinship, while public life (*Gesellschaft*) is a place of contracts and negotiations (Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999).

At the heart of such critical knowledge communities is the teaching staff which forms itself as a community of critical professional enquiry, providing leadership by challenging failure; supporting the professionalisation of teachers; seeking organisational improvement; pursuing knowledge for knowledge's sake; and enhancing theory. It is guided by a dual commitment to social justice and democratic practice, a belief in the power of education to enrich lives, and focuses on the development of student autonomy.

The community of critical professional enquiry flourishes in schools that respect democratic principles by their use of flattened authority structures and the encouragement to share resources and validate the pre-existing knowledge and expertise of all teachers. Certain basic commitments should be in place for a community of critical professional enquiry to lead its critical knowledge community. These commitments are reflected by Kemmis (2008), Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998), Kincheloe (2008) and Pine (2009), and may be loosely grouped as epistemological, ethical and methodological.

i.   Epistemological commitments

A sceptical attitude to the instrumental rationality underpinning best practice solutions and to the efforts to manufacture consent to various policies, particularly when policies are treated by their sponsors as instances of official knowledge is required. A 'radical commitment to openness' (hooks, 2010, p. 10) maintains critical knowledge which is further validated when all the voices in the critical knowledge community are heard.

ii.   Ethical commitments

A commitment to individual autonomy is linked to a view of the good life, promoting the belief that persons should be able to exercise independent control over their lives. The good life is one in which not only are the principles of social justice and democracy actively maintained, but instances of injustice, inhumanity and irrationality are acted against (Kemmis, 2008). Pine (2009) emphasises systemic and relational trust as essential to a healthy community, but in particular should be the development of what Kemmis (2008) calls solidarity amongst its members.

iii.   Methodological commitments

Matters of methodology or practice require that the community be committed to on-going enquiry, critical teacher action research and decisions based on unforced consensus. This enquiry and research are motivated by a mutual desire for critical knowledge gained through thoughtful approaches that develop praxis—morally informed and committed action. Central amongst these approaches is a commitment to critical discussion and dialogue. Dialogue is a critical search for answers, not mutual approbation. This critical mutuality grows out of strong collaboration and collegiality, and supports the deprivatisation of practice.

The insights of Habermas' notion of communicative action illustrate the aims and procedures of the community (1984; 1987 cited by Kemmis, 2008, p. 127). Such action successfully occurs when there is inter-subjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus. For Habermas (2003, pp. 106-107 cited by Kemmis 2008, p. 128), the basis of argumentation should be inclusiveness, equal speaking rights, the exclusion of deception and falsehood, and the absence of restriction on allowing argument to develop and improve. Following Kemmis (2008, p. 131), a school may have to suspend its usual hierarchies, roles and rules in its pursuit of inter-subjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus.

The community will consider issues of immediate concern and establish research questions that emerge from this initial reflection. These questions are problematised as ethical (why should it be done this way? Is it right or just to accept this result/situation? What is wrong here? Who does this hurt most? What will be the best outcome?); epistemological (how do we know? How will we know that we have acted correctly? Who will contribute to this debate/action/result? How will we account for our actions/results?); metaphysical (what are our purposes? What do we desire as an end point? Why is this goal better than that one?); and logical (does this make sense? Is it coherent? Do we all understand? What will ensure that this message is clear and precise?). This philosophical approach is relevant to the community of critical professional enquiry as it aims to transform the circumstances of its workplace and the world it affects to become more just, rational and humane, and ultimately to lead its members to phronesis—wise, prudent and considered action.

References

Alton-Lee, A. (2003). *Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis* (Wellington, Ministry of Education).

Bishop, R. (2003) Changing Power Relations in Education: Kaupapa Maori Messages for Mainstream Education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, *Comparative Education*, 39:2, pp. 221-238.

Education Review Office. (2011) Directions for Learning: The New Zealand Curriculum Principles, and Teaching as Inquiry. Available at http://www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Directions-for-Learning-The-New-Zealand-Curriculum-Principles-and-Teaching-as-Inquiry-May-2011.

Freire, P. (1973) *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (M. Ramos, Trans.) (London, Writers and Readers Collective).

Habermas, J. (1984) Theory of Communicative Action, Vol 1: *Reason and the Rationalisation of Society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.) (Boston, MA, Beacon).

Habermas, J. (1987) Theory of Communicative Action, Vol 2: *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (T. McCarthy, Trans.) (Boston, MA, Beacon).

Habermas, J. (2003) Truth and Justification (B. Fultner, Trans.) (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press).

hooks, b. (2010) *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York/London, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group).

Howard, T. (2003) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Ingredients for Critical Teacher Reflection, *Theory into Practice*, 42:3, pp. 195-202.

Kemmis, S. (2008) Critical Theory and Participatory Action Research in: P. Reason & H. Bradbury (eds.), *Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Research*, 2nd ed, (Los Angeles, SAGE Publications), pp. 121-138.

Kemmis, S., & Wilkinson, M. (1998) Participatory Action Research and the Study of Practice in: B. Atweh, S. Kemmis & P. Weeks (eds.), *Action Research in Practice,* (London/New York, Routledge), pp. 21-36.

Kincheloe, J. (2008) *Critical Pedagogy Primer,* 2nd ed, (New York, Peter Lang).

Ministry of Education. (2007) *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Wellington, Learning Media Limited).

Ministry of Education. (2010, last updated 20/9/2011) Statement of Intent 2010-2015/Situational Analysis. Available at http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/PublicationsAndResources/StatementOfIntent/SOI2010To2015/SituationalAnalysis/AboutSituationalAnalysis.aspx#2.

Pine, G. (2009) *Teacher Action Research: Building Knowledge Democracies* (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications).

Reid, A. (2004) *Towards a Culture of Inquiry in DECS*. Occasional Paper Series. Available at http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/learnerwellbeing/files/links/link_72576.pdf.

Scribner, J. P., Cockrell, K. S., Cockrell, D. H., & Valentine, J. W. (1999) Creating Professional Communities in Schools Through Organisational Learning: An Evaluation of a School Improvement Process, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35:1, pp. 130-160.

Strike, K. (2000) Liberalism, Communitarianism and the Space Between: In Praise of Kindness, *Journal of Moral Education*, 29:2, pp. 133-147.

Tönnies, F. (1887/1988) *Community and Society* (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Books).

van Manen, M. (1977) Linking Ways of Knowing with Ways of Being Practical, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6:3, pp. 205-228.

Zubrick S.R., Silburn S.R., De Maio J.A., Shepherd C., Griffin J.A., Dalby R.B., et al. (2006) The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People. Perth. Available at http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/waachs/themes/education/performance.