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Representing the self in education: The tensions of authorship, authenticity and authority

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Abstract: This paper explores identity and representation in education. The author reflects on and compares three academic events – the development of a portfolio for a teaching fellowship, the presentation of a CV in support of a job application, and the submission of an evidence portfolio for a research assessment exercise. These events are treated as frames through which the themes of authorship, authenticity and authority are traced. It is argued that identity and representation are central to education, and that they are imbued with power relations. Education is learning how identity is constructed, represented and deconstructed. Critical theory, despite its limitations, offers a rich intellectual resource for analysing how current trends in (higher) education refract power through the processes of identity construction and representation. Educators should be concerned about how they are implicated in this process, and it is suggested maintaining a clarity and tension between the ideas of authorship, authenticity and authority may help educators negotiate this implication. Finally, it is suggested it may be a relative insensitivity to these issues that contributes to confusion between structure and process, method and content, and accountability and trust. Such confusion is inimical to a civil society.

Keywords: identity, representation, education

Introduction

According to Nash (education, philosophy of, 2006) one of the most common areas of disagreement among educational theorists concerns the purpose of education. Greene (1995:20) similarly concludes that ‘there is no summing up the themes of what counts as Philosophy of Education’, but writes of initiating the young into a conversation whilst bearing in mind ‘that the great conversation, like culture itself, becomes subject to transformations by means of critique and reflexivity’. This paper concurs with the view that education ought to have a holistic ecological perspective and is critical of the sense of temporality in the Western mindset ‘that influences the modern individual to view the past with suspicion, the present as an existential exercise in de-mystification, and the future as an ever-widening horizon of possibilities’ (Bowers, 1995:318). Ideally, an educational practice shuns methods that inhibit collaboration and cooperation (Martin, 1995:53). In our traditional educational systems, intelligence is valued and judged by the capacity to theorize, and we unfortunately devalue knowing which is structured pre-eminently by feeling or touch (Shapiro 1995). Finally, many philosophers of education (Morrow, 1989) agree that being educated involves a critical awareness of one’s own identity and culture.

It is with this view of education that this paper explores the themes of authorship, authenticity and authority and how power infuses educational practice. Beginning with the question of the role of identity and representation in education, we will argue that a practice of education the fails to explicitly attend to these questions will be flawed. If education is going too contribute to the greatest well-being for the greatest number, it will valorise content over method, substance over form, and process over structure. It will favour values over theories, human beings over concepts, consciousness over abstraction, and conscience rather than efficiency.

Given this view of education and the tension between exploration and control, it is worth considering Marcuse's claim that we live in a 'machine age' (1941:138). Marcuse defined technology as 'a mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterise the machine age [which] is thus at the same time a mode of organizing... an instrument for control and domination' (see also Postman, 1993.) In this state, says Marcuse (p. 142), 'the efficient individual is the one whose performance is an action only insofar as it is the proper reaction to the objective requirements of the apparatus, and his liberty is confined to the selection of the most adequate means for reaching goals which he did not set'. Education in the machine age is the context in which I contrast three fairly common academic experiences – the development of a portfolio for a teaching fellowship, the shaping and presentation of a CV in support of a job application, and the submission of an evidence portfolio for research assessment – and how the themes of authorship, authenticity and authority run through those events. These events all function as registers of identity and entail forms of representation.

The 'representation problem' is the central problem of curriculum (Lundgren, 1983: 191). Kemmis (1996:204) points out that 'the very possibility of education depends on arriving at some view about how people and societies can and should be represented' and goes on to argue that education involves reading a society, developing texts which organize and express these 'readings' in particular forms, and making those texts available to readers. Whatever forms these readings, texts and readers take, the content, organization and transmission of these texts are the abiding concerns of curriculum'. To put it another way, the authoring and authorising of text is *the* issue in education.

Education, like critical theory, is limited by its modernist heritage. So is academic practice. These limitations come to the fore precisely because of the tensions between authorship, authenticity and authority. Critical theory can be considered a guide for human action, and as such aims to produce enlightenment in the agents who hold to its principles, which are inherently emancipatory (Geuss, 1981). The heart of a critical theory of society is its criticism of ideology, since it is ideology that prevents agents from correctly perceiving their true situation and real interests, helping us 'to understand the relations among value, interest, and action' (Popkewitz, 1984:45–7). The critical theory approach is about detecting and unmasking beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice and democracy (Usher, 1996). Although it rejects positivist notions of rationality, objectivity and truth in favour of a dialectical view of rationality (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), it needs to be acknowledged that 'Critical Theory has its own power-knowledge nexus which, in particular contexts and in particular historical moments, will operate in ways that are oppressive and repressive to people within and/or outside' (Gore, 1993:61, in Usher 1995: 25).

This is the theoretical context in which I consider the representation of a self in education. The first of these representations is the in the context of developing a teaching portfolio.

The teaching portfolio: Being an author

The most important feature of this event was its voluntary nature. Another important feature was that although the portfolio had to meet certain specifications, there was some creative latitude. Finally, it was a record of achievement, and the reward for doing it was intrinsic.

A teaching portfolio is a highly personal document made relatively public, and as such is a revelation of one's identity. One authors one's own identity, and represents that 'Self'. My motivations were *inter alia* a desire for professional clarity and a desire for recognition.

Importantly, from start to finish, it was self-motivated. One of the requirements was a statement of a philosophy of education. The following excerpt is self-explanatory:

A philosophy of education is praxis. It is always a work in progress... Offering a philosophy of education is an act of self-education... It engages with a conversation that extends from ancient Greece... [It] is developing the skill to ask worthwhile, useful questions...

In the portfolio the section containing this philosophical statement also included explanations of my leaving South Africa after the riots of Soweto '76, during which apartheid's vision of education as a tool to ensure that black South Africans would be 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' (a statement made famous by a former prime minister H.F. Verwoerd) was destroyed with the widespread realisation that 'The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed' (a statement by the murdered black activist Steve Biko). I left because I could not see an acceptable way of contributing to the struggle for democracy, but, as I explained in the portfolio, I returned three years later intending to implement my philosophy of education which I hoped would contribute to a political, moral, social, and psychological effort, individual and collective, to free our minds.

In another section of the portfolio, in order to provide the required evidence of reflective capacity, I recounted pertinent intellectual moments in my career in the form of 'a research story'. This raised the problematic tensions between presentation, reflection on experience and experience itself and the question of '[H]ow is unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account? How, precisely, is a garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes circumscribed as an adequate version?' (Clifford, 1988:25). The story was densely footnoted indicating my publications relevant to the point being made. For example

... I joined as an Academic Development Officer ... What is it like to teach and do research here? (footnote citing publication). What is it like to be a student here? (footnote citing publication)... I move to New Zealand ... How do I contextualise my teaching of management? (footnote citing publication).

The point to be made here was that I was attempting to author an authoritative account of my identity and an authentic representation of that identity. The development of the portfolio was an act of self-education. It entailed a reflection on experience, it was sense-making, a creative offering, and although difficult, deeply satisfying. As author I was the source of authority. The challenge was to be authentic to myself. The nature of producing a portfolio encouraged transparency and commitment and inhibited inflated claims. Although it was an examination of a kind, and a representation to others which would be subjected to review, the need to address the criteria of assessment rarely overshadowed the excitement of exploration and the challenges of overcoming the complexities of ethnographic storytelling (Atkinson, 1990). Content was valued over method, substance over form, process over structure.

When representing myself in a CV, however, the issue of authenticity in the construction of my identity took on quite a different flavour.

Presenting a CV in support of a job application: Authenticity and persuasion

A CV tells the story of the construction of one's identity, and is a representation of that self, presented to persuade. The question of intention is crucial. A CV has to be legally accurate. Factual accuracy takes precedence over authentic, and the purpose of the document is to

influence a designated audience in a specific way. Choice, whilst it may be limited, is a substantial part of the process. I have chosen my career, my area of study, and set parameters for place, institution and function. Although prescriptions are usually fairly standard, some self-expression is expected. The issue of authenticity arises in the context of veridicality. Although the process is less personal than developing a portfolio, from the moment I see the post advertised and consider applying, I am in a relationship with an institution and a selection panel. Likewise, the institution, through the job description, in its brochures, and on its website, has also set parameters and offers a representation of itself.

Constructing a CV and seeking a position has interesting features that it seems to share with research and education. It is easy to retrospectively give an air of coherence and order to a process that had little to do with how one eventually secured a job. It would be difficult to admit that months of meticulous and steady persistence was a waste of time, because, in fact, you secured a job through the chance efforts of a stranger who knew your friend. Somehow, even if at a certain level we knew we were being superstitious, we would like to credit our effort with having some effect, if only along the lines of the adage 'luck is preparation meeting opportunity'. What we want to produce is an authentic but authoritative account. We claim to be conducting an orderly job search; what we are actually doing is creating those conditions of order which, we believe, have the highest potential to intersect with an infinite number of unpredictable possibilities to create the condition of 'I' meeting 'it'. Education is similar in that we set up conditions and processes (school, university, workshops, courses – a technological apparatus, cf Postman above) in conjunction with irrational, infinite, and unpredictable entities, such as a teacher, student, location, time, event and so on, which, we hope, maximises the chance of a favourable outcome ('educatedness').

The job search is conducted in the face of conditions that have been set by me and others. Both parties exercise authorship, it is in the interest of both parties to be authentic, and both have authority in the process. Both are in a state of tension between passive and active. There is another parallel here with education. Teachers know that the receptivity of students fluctuates, and students or pupils know that the teacher's tolerance for nonsense or responsiveness to brilliance fluctuates. Both parties are held in a constant state of tension between passivity and activity, and, more importantly, it is difficult for one party to discern patterns, much less reasons for the patterns, in the other.

In tracking my feelings as I continued to submit CVs I noticed patterns. When I felt lacking in confidence, or, conversely, allowed myself to become unrealistically optimistic, I cut out many more advertisements. Later, as I reviewed them, I often discarded many of them. I am not sure which came first, a sense of realism that led me to discard them and which led to a sense of confidence, or a sense of confidence that allowed me to be more realistic and then discard them. The point was that my sense of well-being and confidence was related to the extent to which I rejected being passive. The act of discarding those advertisements for which I felt I might not be an appropriate candidate, or those which for some reason did not appeal to me after all, was an act of confidence, or even self-assertion. One state was a state of desire, and love, a passion for myself, for the work I wanted to do. The other state was one of fear or anxiety; I must, I thought, take all opportunities, no matter how remote, because I could not trust the right situation would come about and if it did not it would be my fault, because I didn't work hard enough and didn't take every opportunity.

We have made our traditional educational systems work (as distinct from creating educated individuals) – insofar as they can be said to work – by provoking fear and anxiety, by manipulating students into performance anxiety. We sometimes acknowledge that

performance anxiety can be deleterious, but on the whole, we continue to run our systems along this fault line. We do it so that as educators, we don't lose control, even while we repeatedly assert that our aim is to create independent, autonomous, educated individuals.

When my job search and production of CVs was geared towards assessing how worthwhile I was to others, the process was a source of anxiety, my self-respect waned, and my passion declined. I was looking for love in the way that a child who has come to expect that love must be earned debases himself or herself in searching for it. Good CVs and presentations resulted from acting like a competent and confident professional academic and engaging in the academic rituals of research and publication. I sought all relevant information and appropriately addressed my audience. In reality, I both surrendered and claimed authenticity and authorship in a process that fluctuated between self-education and submissive response.

However, even though I 'submitted' my CV and application, the nature of the submission and the authority involved was quite different to the experience of fulfilling the requirement for a research assessment.

Fulfilling the requirements for research assessment: Submitting to authority

Bearing in mind what Marcuse wrote about fulfilling the objective requirements of the apparatus, an appropriate reference here is Deming's 1986 claim that remains sustainable:

Evaluation of performance, merit rating, or annual review... nourishes short-term performance, annihilates long-term planning, builds fear, demolishes teamwork, nourishes rivalry and politics. It leaves people... bruised, ... feeling inferior, even depressed... It is unfair...

Evidence on the deleterious effects of research assessment exercises and performance appraisals in academia (Benshop & Brouns, 2003; Bernard, 2000; Lee & Harley, 1998; Blackmore, 1997; Brett, 2000; Marginson, 2000; Talib, 2001; Tawhai *et al.*, 2004; Willmott, 2003; Monastersky, 2005) confirm Deming's observations. They have a categorizing function, 'an act of power which marginalises' (Lather, 1991). They disembodify and isolate the academic. At stake here is the identity and representation of the apparatus and those who manage it. It is a case of displacing performance anxiety. This is a feature of management. Managers fear that 'in the absence of direction and control, little or nothing would be produced, the potential of subordinates would be unfulfilled and the lack of objective information on current progress would exclude the possibility of reviewing their activities' (Willmott 1984:354).

A research assessment exercise requires intellectuals to assess their activities in terms of calculable outcomes set by others. One has to make sure that one is being efficient in specific, pre-established terms. Given the authority, in the sense of *the power of the apparatus* to which one must respond, and the apparatus's requirement for standardised comparable quantities, one is encouraged to work in terms of the short-term return, to accept the framework, and not question the boundaries; one fills in the form as it is designed. Thus a certain logic or sequencing of questions is enforced at the personal level. The question Who am I?, which could spark off a range of open-ended questions inviting enquiry and discovery such as What is my potential? What can I discover about myself or others? What might be worthwhile? What is needed in the world? What might I contribute? is transformed into a question of economics. I am reduced from being a source of meaning, productivity, faith, hope, fear, choice, history, etc., to an investment option, an object of assessment in terms of

return on investment tied to a specific time and place. In other words, I am reduced from a person to a commodity. This involves a shift in locus of control and the surrendering of authorship. I now have to ask What is required? How will it rank? and such questions which lead me to transform Who am I? to Am I economically viable? Now, instead of looking at what I do in the light of questions such as, Is this going to help anyone? Does it contribute anything useful? Is it enjoyable? I must ask, What category does this fit into and how will it rank, how many points do I get? How will I eventually be rated? Colleagues whom I hold in high regard talk less and less about the actual research they do and more and more about the number of outputs they have produced. It is profoundly anti-educational. It does not encourage authenticity, but rather engenders the mindset of surviving verification.

In traditional education, the examination is supposed to function as an assessment of 'educatedness'. The recognition of the limited effectiveness of the examination in this function has led to the use of continuous assessment. Such awareness has also sometimes informed the design and implementation of quality assurance programmes for educators in education, for example through portfolio assessment. The problem is that just as students know they must prepare for an exam, institutions know they are going to be assessed. In both cases the exam or assessment is not a positive contribution to the quality of the condition, it reports on it. Students and institutions do not produce quality because of an assessment; they ensure that they perform for an assessment. I suspect that one of the best assessments of a student's progress may be that student's own assessment of their progress. Is that not what we look for in higher education – the capacity to give an accurate self-assessment? A substantial indicator of being educated is the capacity to offer an authoritative account of one's identity and an authentic representation of it.

My intuitive dislike of what research assessment exercises require is regularly refreshed. A workshop facilitator recently explained that the submission of an Evidence Portfolio 'is all about selling yourself'. The degradation is complete. The "I" or "self" that embodies the Odysseus in us all, that is the provenance of endless questions, that articulates the call that draws us to the educational vocation, is reduced to an agent, an instrument, a technique that must become part of the apparatus that must act upon itself to reduce that self to a commodity that can be traded in the market place. One's importance rests on being a conceptual signifier ("research active academic") rather than on being a human. In a triumph of method over content, form over substance, and structure over process, one ... *submits ... evidence ...* to an *authority ...* of the *apparatus*.

Conclusion

I am intrigued by how often I can refashion, for the umpteenth time, an introduction of myself, the account of a research process, or summarise 30 years of working life. All are true, but all are different. I know this, selection panels know this.

There are lessons to be learnt from the telling and retelling. When developing my teaching portfolio, the dominant emotions were curiosity, thrill, passion, and satisfaction. In searching for a position, I experienced roughly two sets of emotions: desire, passion, love, interest, hope, eagerness, which was light; and boredom, resentment, and frustration, which was muddy and messy and dark. The first was when I was applying for jobs that excited me, the second was when I was applying for jobs that I thought I ought to apply for, irrespective of what I felt. The first condition is one of me being connected to my true desire and passion, the second arises out of me trying to please other voices that come from a sense of inadequacy and feeling distracted. The first led to quality results, the second usually to poor quality.

Finally, fulfilling the requirements for a research assessment exercise was a frustrating experience, one which, had I taken the injunction to 'sell myself' seriously, could also have been degrading.

Education is marked by love, fear, desire and boredom. What can we say of the tyrannical abusive teacher? Certainly there is passion there, but it is not love. If we pursue this line of thinking, we may argue that a good indicator of an educator's effectiveness is her own self-reported level of satisfaction, that is to say, her own sense of love and passion for her work. Educators who report high levels of fear and loathing, or a high degree of indifference or frustration, are less likely to be effective. This casts an unhealthy glow over the current pressure on educators to record 'objective' measures of achievement or effectiveness. The demands of such pressure distract them from the core passion of their work and provoke frustration and indifference. In other words, they destroy exactly that which it they purport to measure.

If we assume that teachers/educators are professionals capable of professional judgement, then surely we should trust them to make professional decisions. The efficacy of my professional judgements is informed by my reflection on my experience not by experience alone, nor by abstract thinking alone. Principles can be learnt and professionalism can be developed, but it is unlikely that they will be developed when one's performance is guided by the fulfilling of abstract criteria developed by others. Such a guide is an attempt to make a mechanical, controllable, predictable and robotic process out of a tumultuous, infinitely complex human process.

I have several times referred to the tension between method and content, form and substance, and structure and process. These tensions exist in social philosophies such as critical theory and educational philosophy. They are the legacy of the Enlightenment, and have been substantially, if polemically, analysed by Saul (1993). However, since my identity, my career in education, and my struggle for authorship, authenticity and authority has been shaped by the oppressive use of education in South Africa I prefer to end by recalling the observation of Eli Wiesel who pointed out that the designers and perpetrators of the Holocaust were the heirs of Kant and Goethe:

In most respects the Germans were the best educated people on Earth, but their education did not serve as an adequate barrier to barbarity. What was wrong with their education? In Wiesel's words: 'it emphasized theories, instead of values, concepts rather than human beings, abstraction rather than consciousness, answers instead of questions, ideology and efficiency rather than conscience. (Orr, no date)

The resonances with trends in modern (higher) education are worrying.

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