

Despite Ourselves? Education Studies: between spirit and ‘passing on’

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a curricular intervention made by lecturers on the Education Studies degree programme at Newman University College (a programme that stands alone without any proximal relation to teacher training). In so doing, it engages with the “spirit” or “ideal subject” of Education Studies in relation to its institutionalised practices.

Key words: Education Studies, Curriculum, Discourse

The Newman degree has in recent years moved away in the first year from establishing a paradigmatic model to fostering an interdisciplinary approach. The lived experience of this for undergraduates has been an emphasis at level four on reflective engagement with themes (pedagogy, classroom environments, influences on education) and the avoidance of teaching about named disciplines (psychology, sociology and philosophy). This avoidance has been strategic rather than accidental as the “spirit” of the course is resistant to such academic division of labour and territory. In effect, alongside a satisfaction with this spirit, concerns have arisen over the “ungrounded” nature of student reflections – in the worst cases, Education Studies is reduced to little more than “my school history”, isolated and abstracted from any critical, analytical or research perspective. In response a new module was introduced as a theoretical foundation, taking students through three established themes structure and agency (sociology), identity and the construction of self and truth and justice. For each theme a set of “key thinkers” were “taught” with a prescribed reading load and related assessments. This has been a significant departure, and has necessitated a willingness to dispose of assumptions about levels and degrees of complexity.

‘The definition of a subject is always problematic, and this is especially true of one which has a variety of contexts which are changing with considerable speed.’ (McGetterick, 2000, p. 1)

‘Educational knowledge is a major regulator of the structure of experience.’ (Bernstein, 1971, p. 47)

Education Studies is situated by dependency. It is dependent on the various forms of formal and informal education which it observes, and – for better or worse, has arranged itself as more or less dependent on, but never far away from, the professional practice of teaching. Bernstein describes pedagogic discourse as a form of power in itself, as opposed to a carrier of an external power or ideology. Ironically, there are relatively few examples of the study of Education Studies as discourse.

Education Studies defines itself in proximal relations *to*, and also as distinct *from* its informing and adjacent academic disciplines and the institutional practices of teacher training and continuing professional development. The formulation of this self-identity has the status of a horizontal discourse (Bernstein, 1990). As such there is no “neat” arrangement of the subject’s field that can be handed down, passed on or quickly described. Thus we might assume that the experiences of Education Studies undergraduates may vary more from institution to institution than the experiences of, say, History students. Whether this matters, or indeed is to be celebrated, is for debate.

In this article we explore the ways in which lecturers articulate versions of subject identity, essence and “spirit” in relation to the curriculum intervention made by the new module at Newman. These accounts are examined in relation to Bernstein’s concept of “recontextualization” whereby an academic subject is framed by existing discourses and conditions of classification within, or in proximal relation to, other fields of practice, in this case both academic (Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, History) and social (the development of critically informed teachers). This we engage with the “spirit” or “ideal subject” (Lacan, 1979) of Education Studies in relation to its institutionalised practices.

Education Studies undergraduates at Newman have encountered a version of the subject informed by an interdisciplinary, thematic and highly reflective approach, and have not in recent years been “trained” explicitly in pre-existing academic discourses such as Psychology, Sociology and Philosophy. Alongside this “spirit”, the subject has been institutionally and academically decoupled from teacher education. Modules are not co-taught and the staff do not necessarily service teacher training programmes. Using Ward’s (2004) review of the national profile as a guide, this appears to be an unusual if not unique configuration, which has strategic rather than accidental as the “spirit” of the course is resistant to traditional academic arrangements and divisions of labour and territory. However, the new module *Introduction to Education Studies* was developed as a remedy for a perceived “lack” as, in effect, alongside a satisfaction with the spirit of the course, there have been attendant concerns over the “ungrounded” nature of the typical student response, often abstracted from any critical, analytical or research perspective.

The new module raises, then, this question – for students to engage critically with entrenched academic discourses – to access the “spirit” of more progressive thinking – must we “train” them first within these language games?

The *Real* of Education Studies

How does Education Studies see itself? This question opens up the issue of the identity of Education Studies – what we might think of – informed by Lacan (1979) - as a tension between what Education Studies is and what it feels it ought to be at any given moment in its history. This element of insecurity may induce anxieties of various kinds but particularly in relation to what the subject perceives as *other* to itself. Education Studies might represent the “Other” of teacher education (McDougall, Walker and Kendall, 2006). If it stands outside of teacher training as a distinct – if arguably adjacent – domain of practice, and attempts to forge its own academic discourse outside of, but informed by other disciplines, how does it create its self-identity?

Theorising Education Studies

Whilst it could be concluded that, initially at least, Education Studies has grown from theory for teaching (Ward, 1995) there is a lack of consensus over its purpose, what it's for. The degree to which it stands alone as a discrete subject, and its relationship to teacher training in all of its guises, is uncertain, as these two statements reveal.

We need ways of studying education which employ critical theory but which, at the same time, can be taken seriously by future teachers. Given that we are in the market place, this appeal to applicants is essential. It is no use our sitting in our new glass and concrete towers proclaiming the virtues of critical analysis while students are going off to do attractive degrees in Childhood Studies. The trick is to make Education Studies relevant (Ward, 2004).

We wish to contest the idea that the being (or *dasein*) of Education Studies need be understood in any contextual relation with teacher training and subsequently with the discourses of standards, accountability and compliance other than a relation of deconstruction (McDougall, Walker and Kendall, 2006).

So the perceptions of those who deliver the subject will be at variance not only from each other but also from students. Thus the subject is seemingly striving for its' own identity. Whilst Ball (1995, p. 256) suggests 'the weak grammars of educational studies, those concepts, relations and procedures upon which it rests, are becoming weaker' .It could be argued that more recently the foundations of Education Studies as a discrete subject have been shored up by a shift away from notions of "professionalism" and "instrumentalism" towards a greater emphasis on academic discourse. Nevertheless, it is the *nature* of this discourse that is contested.

Educational Studies is no longer just a context in which policy, practice and research take place, but is also becoming (or *re-becoming*) an academic discipline or area in its own right (Davies and Hogarth, 2004). This "discipline" is always-already situated in relation to Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology. The extent to which these strands should be subsumed either discretely or in an inter-disciplinary sense is open to debate. This in turn has implications for students' prior understanding and engagement with these disciplines. Whereas it is expected that History undergraduates will have followed a particular progressionary route the same cannot be said of Educational Studies undergraduates. Their profiles will be, by definition, varied and consequently their access to the subject potentially precarious.

Bartlett and Burton (2007, p. 2) observe that within Education Studies the traditional disciplines 'are used in an eclectic manner to study key education issues'. Free from the supportive scaffolds of disciplinarity this approach requires arguably higher levels of student commitment and engagement than more established subjects.

The Curriculum Intervention

Education Studies at Newman College is offered within Combined Honours as either a minor, joint or major route. It initially grew as a response to student withdrawal from undergraduate Initial Teacher Training with the assumption that '...this was intended for students who would eventually teach in schools and colleges, with little thought about education as a practice in other settings and spaces.' (Trotman, 2005, p. 2). In this sense Education Studies as a "pure" subject in its own right without any relation to Initial Teacher Training either as a theoretical backdrop or as an alternative to instrumentalism does not feature in its genealogy.

The new module aimed to establish for first year undergraduates the study of Education and as an inter-disciplinary field drawing upon the History, Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology of Education. With key themes as “Structure and Agency”, “Identity and the Construction of Self”, and “Truth and Justice” the students were required to study aspects of family, social class, gender, sexuality, self-concept, intelligence and learning in relation to such “big names” as Plato, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Foucault, Bernstein and Bourdieu. Assessment was via an individual written interpretation of two educational papers and a group poster presentation in response to a choice of critical questions.

Whilst Matheson (1999, p. 13) contends that ‘Education Studies is perhaps unique among academic disciplines in that all students can bring directly to bear their own experiences and their own process of education’, it was the intention here to challenge student assumptions about education based on their own biographies. Consequently, students would be equipped with an understanding of the “field” in which these challenges would take place, however provocative and uncomfortable that might be.

Lecturer discourse

As we would expect for a subject arranged by a horizontal discourse (Bernstein, 1990), the teaching staff for the module have different profiles. Four have a compulsory teaching background (three broad primary and one secondary), two have experience of Further Education and one comes from a career in applied Psychology. Recent research outcomes from the team include articles on imaginative education and creativity, the sociology of Education Studies, media education, videogames and education and ethnographic qualitative research, collaborative approaches to educational leadership and change management and Esther Bick’s early work.

When asked about the function of Education Studies, there were a range of responses, some clearly opposed. Lecturer One saw it as a ‘reflexive discipline in its own right, not necessarily tethered to development for teachers’ and a ‘study of education in all its various forms – a broad academic discipline.’ This purity of subject was defended more vehemently by Lecturer Two who said ‘I don’t think it has anything at all to do with teaching or teacher training. To me it is fundamentally a form of textual analysis and is part of Cultural Studies - it is an exploration of power dynamics at work in education and, from Foucault the ways in which power is exercised through the illusion of neutrality - the concept of legitimation (what counts as knowledge, what counts as education for particular groups at particular times).’ However, Lecturer Four felt that the subject is ‘committed to the idea of the reflective practitioner, unshackled from the standards regime and strictures of Initial Teacher Training’ and that its purpose is to ‘develop a level of critical reflection in students to question their own practices, systems of education, structures of education and principles on which education is premised ... a political enterprise.’ Further still, Lecturer Five felt that ‘Some students use it as a route into teaching – it makes sense to them and makes sense to me. I think you end up with much more rounded teacher as they have addressed all those issues that we can no longer address in an ITT route.’ There was some consensus that Education Studies should respond to traditional academic disciplines in an eclectic fashion. Lecturer Four regarded Educational Studies as ‘an interdisciplinary field of endeavour. It is not a multidisciplinary field of study. A lot of courses are weakened by the fact that they have Sociology of Education over here. Psychology of Education over there and in some cases it’s purist and compartmentalised. It becomes fragmentary and atomistic so I think the way in which disciplinarity informs education, crucially inter-disciplinarity, is very important, but you have to understand the relationship between sociology and psychology to do the helpful

critique.’ This was echoed by Lecturer Three, who felt that Education Studies was ‘an applied version of a range of disciplines’. Lecturer Five saw the subject as historically having been ‘clearly defined as either sociology or psychology and I didn’t like that and neither did the students’. However, Lecturer Seven felt that it was about ‘taking discipline perspectives – e.g. sociology - exploring how we are shaped by structures, practices and interactions - education as hegemony apparatus for masking inequality and exacerbating it.’.

Consequently it was clear that Lecturers had begun to construct particular identities in relation to the subject. Lecturer Four felt that ‘it is part of the overall educational endeavour in my own professional development to understand the interrelationships between disciplines and where the sites of contest are and that ‘part of our work is to look at how themes around education, social justice and learning processes for example are understood in an interdisciplinary way.’, whilst Lecturer Seven stated that they had developed ‘a strong link to perspectives about the learner, learning and the socio-cultural context of learning’ and that their identity was ‘very school situated, probably because of their practitioner ‘vocational’ background.’. Lecturer Two, however, had a clear sense of their own distance from the views of others, declaring that ‘I sit outside of the shared identity, which I quite like. I think there is a shared identity - based on a liberal, primary education focussed sense of social good and citizenship which is fair enough, and links to the Every Child Matters agenda of course. But I see myself as slightly obtuse to it all because a) I am from FE, b) I am nothing to do with ITT and c) the poststructuralist/media stuff I do is a bit at odds with the ECM/citizenship stuff’.

Clearly there were conflicting views as to the nature of the subject, but these conflicts were not necessarily seen as negative. Lecturer Four felt that conflicts were ‘welcome’ and ‘a natural part of the process of working in an interdisciplinary field with people with very different educational biographies’. They went on to state that ‘those sites of contest and different perspectives strengthen the integrity of the programme. I think the danger is when those differences start to manifest themselves in programme design. Then it starts to affect student identity and we certainly made that mistake in the past when students could sign up to distinct pathways of doing the psychology or sociology of education’. Lecturer Three stated that ‘There are healthy debates (not conflicting) considering the variety of backgrounds and subject expertise. Constructive tension in terms of the way we approach things collectively does reflect a willingness to engage’, whereas Lecturer Five felt that the collective view was ‘far more shared now than it was’ and that there was a ‘whole team approach’.

When considering why the intervention was made there was a broad agreement as to the perceived ‘lack’ in the previous provision in the first year. Lecturer One felt that there had been ‘dissatisfaction with the foundation provided in the first year as it was insufficiently grounded in terms of core theories students need to arm themselves with for future development.’. Lecturer Three concurred with this sense of dissatisfaction, recalling that ‘we were concerned about what had happened - it had become applied to the extent that students interpreted the predecessor in completely personal and subjective ways (there has to be an element of that), but it had become very much this is what I know about education from my experience of being educated rather than from my experience of education ... there was a lack of theory’. Lecturer Four alluded to the fact that the previous modules had failed to address the major concerns, that ‘we ended up with something that was not coherent for the students. It did not make sense cross the landscape. It was very fragmentary - even within the module certain ideas did not correspond’. They also felt that the new intervention would make things clearer for the students, describing the new module as ‘an emphatic statement of saying this is how we believe education is informed, but also, crucially, these

are the sites of contest ... and most importantly to say this is how the course of study will operate over this module - take it or leave it. There wasn't any sense that we wanted to be oversensitive to students who weren't ready for the challenge.' Lecturer Seven felt 'that the key concern was a 'lack of theoretical rigour in student understanding', whilst Lecturer Two believed that we needed to 'ground student work at level four in theoretical disciplines. You can't challenge or reject paradigms like psychology, sociology and philosophy if you don't know them'.

So it was clear that concerns about student engagement were shared. However in terms of the students' response to the new module there were mixed views. Lecturer Two felt that there was an 'excellent response in sessions, but poor in final assessment. Most students opted out of the "weightier" theory and went for a summary of the National Curriculum'. Lecturer Six shared this view that 'generally the students were more enthused in sessions but they seemed incapable of assimilating the broad themes such as structure and agency without relying on simplistic personal biographies'. Lecturer Three was more magnanimous and stated that 'I think it made a difference - it did get students discussing and debating and for some students it was a very difficult first module. Some students found the process of being expected to engage with ideas from day one quite challenging'. Lecturer Four felt that it was a challenge for many students, observing that 'some of the students inevitably come on the course thinking that Education Studies is about learning tips for teachers. For some simply engaging in theoretical work, philosophically, ideologically, reading is a challenge. We probably won't know the real return on this until much later in the course because in modules such as knowledge and ideology of education it will give us an opportunity to return to these themes. It has introduced a much stronger platform to have a stronger image of that work, for some students that will occur later rather than sooner'.

There were also mixed interpretations as to the student responses in assessment. Lecturer Five stated that 'I liked the poster presentation because the students had to talk through the process. The best were brilliant and very stimulating and the worst were not. The students who got it we were really impressed with the level of their engagement and the ability of them to talk about the issues', which was at variance with the views of Lecturer Four who worried that 'I'm not sure we got it right with the poster presentation. Are we encouraging risk? Are we enabling enough in assessment strategies to encourage creativity? Is it robust enough?'. Lecturer Seven was dissatisfied with the assessment but alluded to some positive 'knock on' effects of the intervention, reflecting that 'the assessments were not as forthcoming, (as student engagement in sessions) so perhaps we need to further consolidate, coordinate and homogenize the theoretical, personal and practical'.

When considering, with the benefit of hindsight, the intervention as a whole it was evident, again, that the experience was mixed. Lecturer Two felt that, despite our best efforts, 'it seems like the students in many cases found a loophole and managed to turn the module back into an ITT style description of policy. Most of them avoided dealing with the three themes explicitly when it came to the poster presentations and as a result there was little evidence of reading beyond the policy - mainly the National Curriculum. My suggestion for next year is that we reduce the critical questions to five and remove the 'how has education changed' question as it is too easy to answer this from a basic historical/descriptive starting point'. Lecturer Seven also was unsure as the 'theoretical aspects were too discrete - it became a 'dead white male theorists' session and for obvious reasons was not very exciting - perhaps we need to identify key contemporary issues - and through that prism explore the perspectives which inform and illuminate them.'. Lecturer Five felt differently, reporting that 'the students were quite responsive. It can be like pulling teeth and it wasn't like that... generally I feel much more positive'. Perhaps the response of Lecturer Four best sums up

the overall mood, articulated as 'the Latin route of curriculum is 'currere'- meaning a journey - I like that word. This was yet another revision in making Educational studies a stronger field of endeavour. It's a bit like what a politician in the Mao regime said when asked what he thought of the French revolution and he said it is a bit too early to tell!'

Discourse analysis

To make sense of this discursive data we employ a structural approach informed by Bernstein (1971, 1990) along with an interest in how these statements articulate notions of the ideal subject, for which we use a symbolic language from Lacan (1979). It seems from our study that Education Studies academics, on this evidence, are expert in deconstructing the dynamics of educational classification. There is shared allegiance to the identity of the subject as a weakly classified integrated code. As one of the lecturers says, 'there is no one purpose for Education Studies'. In addition, it is clear from these accounts that this weak classification is accompanied by weak framing and thus a great deal of autonomy for both teachers and students over what counts as legitimate knowledge. We conclude from this that Education Studies understands itself (its spirit) as a horizontal discourse. But how this manifests itself in the social practices of learning and teaching is described (and presumably, then, experienced) differently.

We identify four emerging discourses. The first is a discourse of **lack and desire**. The lack is the result of the weak classification and framing – articulated by "it had become very much this is what I know about education from my experience of being educated rather than from my experience of education ... there was a lack of theory" and by "perhaps we need to further consolidate, coordinate and homogenize the theoretical, personal and practical". The desire is partly emancipatory, for the subject to make a difference and partly a "will to power", for control of student responses. The former strand can be found in the reference to the journey, the revolution and Mao and in the description of the subject as "a cathartic experience for some of them – they get rid of some ghosts", whilst the latter is articulated by "it seems like the students in many cases found a loophole and managed to turn the module back into an ITT style description of policy".

The second theme is to do with resistance to academic classification, which we describe as a discourse of **the other**. We can locate this theme in "those sites of contest and different perspectives strengthen the integrity of the programme" and in "a lot of courses are weakened by the fact that they have Sociology of Education over here. Psychology of Education over there and in some cases it's purist and compartmentalised". Most strongly, this discourse is presented in theoretical aspects which were too discrete - it became a "dead white male theorists' session" and in the recollection that in the past, modules had been "clearly defined as either sociology or psychology and I didn't like that and neither did the students".

The discourse of resistance can be read as being at odds with a discourse of **identification**, which presents a need to form a relation with the other in order to form a coherent sense of self. This theme is illustrated by "you can't challenge or reject paradigms like psychology, sociology and philosophy if you don't know them" and by "it is part of the overall educational endeavour in my own professional development to understand the interrelationships between disciplines and where the sites of contest are".

Finally, all of the statements are elaborations on a universal, but abstract theme – the notion of critique which provides a discourse of **the Real**. This discourse mobilise the subject's "spirit". This discourse is the articulation of a belief in critical thinking as an outcome of

education and as such it is emancipatory. We can find this discourse in most of the statements made, but it resonates particularly clearly in the way the subject is legitimated through its ability to “develop a level of critical reflection in students to question their own practices, systems of education, structures of education and principles on which education is premised ... a political enterprise”. Crucially, despite the location of teacher education in the “othering” discourse, the discourse of the Real is partly dependent on it – “I think you end up with a much more rounded teacher as they have addressed all those issues that we can no longer address in an ITT route” and “I have noticed that those PGCEs who have been through an Ed Studies route have a much more broad, open and critical view of education”. The discourse of the Real, dependent as it is on an idea of critique, is problematic in that it is both empty and full (like the very different discourse of standards – see McDougall, Walker and Kendall, 2006). It is full in the sense that the lecturers all agree on the importance of students engaging and being critical, and that this is what we should be “passing on”, yet it is empty in that it has no meaning in isolation from other discourses. “Critical autonomy” is hard to anchor without recourse to an existing, theoretical framework which might then serve to undermine the notion of critique, fostered as it is on a sense of independence.

What Arises?

There are two levels to our interpretation. Firstly, we can say that this range of responses articulates a shared sense of a partly successful intervention. And secondly, we can explore further the ways in which success is perceived in relation to how the ideal subject of Education Studies might be differently realised. Education Studies - when it attempts to exist outside of teacher training and between academic disciplines - can be understood as being caught between two states of consciousness – the recourse to, and thus identification with, the Other of existing academic disciplines, which undermines the idea of critique embedded in the discourse of the Real, and the alternative of free-floating “untheoretical” storytelling. The desire for something in between, both resistant to the notion of ‘passing on’ existing disciplines and at the same time critical and ‘engaged’ with the “spirit” of the subject, situates us in an irresistible state of alienation and fragmentation (or even *jouissance*), permanently in discord with (and despite of) ourselves, never able to rest.

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