

Re-imagining the new educational professional: opportunities, challenges and consequences for Education Studies

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Abstract

The connection between Education Studies and UK Initial Teacher Training is difficult to avoid, particularly given their histories. For many working in the field this is also desirable as it offers an opportunity to reclaim cherished principles of teacher education free from the shackles of regulation and surveillance. In this paper the authors question a retrospective framing of Education Studies and, while sympathetic to the liberal-humanist traditions often embodied in these ambitions, argue instead for a reappraisal of what it means to educate through Education. Drawing on experiences of Education Studies and ITT programmes, and in conjunction with contemporary thinking around teacher professionalism, the authors call for a re-imagining of the educational professional. The paper argues for Education Studies as a preparation for educational practice where moral, ethical and value conflicts are properly accounted for in evolving educational identities. The paper concludes that Education Studies has an obligation to widen the spectrum of educational practices with which it has traditionally been concerned, reaching beyond simplistic conceptions of reflection to a practice of informed educational judgement.

Key words: *person-centredness, critical pedagogy, critical consciousness, teacher education*

Introduction

Amongst the themes that typically dominate the field of Education Studies, matters of disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity, professional preparation and identity, critical inquiry, and educational praxis are relatively easy to locate. For many working in the field, such 'sites of contest' are stock material in the day-to-day educational practice of Education Studies. In this paper, we share our observations on what we believe to be an emerging contemporary challenge for many, who, like us, have deliberately sought to separate curriculum and educational praxis in Education Studies from the contemporary training regimes of Initial Teacher Training. The consequent disconnection of Education from the formative construction of traditional teacher identities coupled with our strong desire for a critical consciousness of student practice (what some call *consciencization*, Apple *et al*, 2001:131) presents new opportunities to reassess the idea of *studentship in Education*.

The 'new' professional

The New Right rhetoric around current approaches to the 'training' of teachers is well documented (Adams and Tulasiewicz, 1995) in which such terms as 'teaching quality', 'professional competence' and 'curriculum delivery' have supplanted meaningful discourse around reflection and pupil learning – what Stephen Ball calls the 'discourse of derision' (Ball, 1990). In the 're-modernisation' of the teaching profession, the continuance of Ofsted, league tables, and 'standardisation' have reinforced this 'derision' with the subsequent emergence of a model of the teacher who simply delivers the curriculum – a technician, if you will. As a result,

...the educational values of teachers have been subjugated to the values of the 'system', teaching has been transformed into a value-neutral technical process, and 'good practice' has been reduced to a bureaucratically framed specification of competencies and skills. What is conspicuously absent from these policies is any serious attempt to recognize – let alone answer – important questions about the role of teachers in a democratic society and hence about what the aims, content and organization of teacher education should be. (Carr and Hartnett, 1996: 117)

Carr and Hartnett (1996) stress that the removal of professional autonomy means that teachers have no protection against external coercion and will simply become instruments of their political directors. This view is echoed more recently by Carr (2000) and Tomlinson (2001) who argue that teachers have been systematically subject to de-professionalisation through the imposition of standardised curricula and technocratisation and control of the workforce. How, then, are they able to establish an educational environment which will sustain the development of democratic values and practices in their students?

Studentship

The prior conceptions of students embarking on a teaching career are important to consider here. According to Saunders (1994: vii) 'student life becomes one of strategic travelling: in other words, a development towards achieving ends which are decided upon at the outset but may be changed along the way'. It is that decision at the outset which encourages students to identify with a subject or profession. It is comfortable for a student to have the identity of 'doing medicine' or 'becoming a teacher' as it gives their studies a purpose at a time of great change in their lives. Groups of students, such as Art or Sports Science, may adopt a clear visual identity. In recent times, as education has become more expensive and students from backgrounds with no tradition of higher education are entering university, it has become increasingly necessary for students to have a clear purpose and vocational outcome, rather than studying for its own sake – historically a luxury for those who could afford it, or more recently, for those who chose it in that heyday when grants were available to all.

Another major change in the way people view the higher education experience is the increased involvement of employers and the need for students to be able to develop what Saunders (1994) called 'a self-centred axiom of learning', in other words the ability to negotiate work-related objectives, preferred learning styles and agreed outcomes. This approach encourages the idea that the learning journey is prescribed and is simply a route to an agreed set of outcomes, rather than the learning journey itself being complex and exploratory and having a value of its own.

In our experience, one thing nearly all Education Studies students have in common is that they tend not to see the subject as 'political', or controversial, and in their first year the content of the programme is intentionally designed to 'disturb the comfortable' and challenge previously held beliefs in what Education actually is, or what it is for. It is not uncommon for students to use the experience as a catharsis for their own educational biography. The developing relationship with tutors, as well as engagement with the material, plays a crucial part in this process. In the course at Newman College we recognise this and, with deliberate intention, introduce powerful and controversial material to stimulate debate that engages students *emotionally* in their and others' experiences. In a way, this has become an expected part of the learning process through the first year experience – a kind of rite of passage. Tutors talk of when the students 'get it' – when they realise that this is not a course that is going to teach them how to be teachers, but rather a course that will:

question the nature and purposes of education, to engage in continuing dialogue about what education is, what an educational experience should involve, why education is so often considered a 'good' thing, what its purposes are for individuals and for society. (Bartlett and Burton, 2003: 1-2)

This is a pretty good place to start again on the journey to how to become a teacher/educator. The journey then brings them to the realisation that education and 'being a teacher' is, in fact, political.

This is a great discovery, education is politics! What a teacher discovers is that he or she is a politician, too, the teacher has to ask 'What kind of politics am I doing in the classroom?' (Paulo Freire, 1987, quoted in Fisher, 2004: 270)

Could Freire say this today? We doubt it. We believe that starting from a study of the National Curriculum, classroom management, assessment, standards and teaching and learning approaches, as in prescribed ITT programmes, is not the best route to becoming an informed educational professional - a teacher. Furthermore, as different professional collaborations begin to emerge that involve participants working between and across professional sectors of education, health care, social work etc, new professional demands and challenges have begun to take shape.

Critical consciousness and person-centred approaches

In this contemporary context three main ideas emerge as having particular merit in the evaluation of the function of Education Studies. The first centres on the promotion of the student's *critical consciousness*. For many of us teaching within the subject area of Education Studies there has been a growing anxiety around a perceived and real absence of a critical imperative amongst students in relation to broad educational matters. Such themes have at any one time embraced issues of poverty, globalisation, faith schools, educational standards and performativity.

These anxieties have manifested themselves in our own formal and informal professional discourses in which the language of critical consciousness and critical pedagogy frequently emerges. As educators in Education we have sought to develop what Giroux calls 'the self-conscious critique': 'critical awareness and knowledge of one's self and the nature and causes of one's political conditions' (Giroux, 2001: 8, quoted in Lee, 2006: 7). Early attempts to establish this in our introductory Education Studies modules have resulted in useful and interesting auto-ethnographic processes for some students, but for many it was to

become little more than an instrumental account of their educational histories with a most limited sense of location in socio-political context and time; Griffin and McDougall (2007) offer their own account of our response to this. Crucially, we remain committed to the idea of promoting 'the self-conscious critique' throughout the programme, but have been challenged to readdress both methodology and assessment practices in undertaking this.

The second of these ideas relates to *Critical Pedagogy*. Lee (2006) describes critical pedagogy as evolving from 'the theories of progressive educators who embodied radical principles, beliefs, and practices for the purpose of analyzing the effect of capitalism and gendered and radicalized relations on marginalized and disenfranchised populations' (Lee, *op. cit.*: 6). Certainly, we would argue that such an imperative sits at the heart of the educational mission in our Education Studies course. It is indeed endorsed by the QAA (2007, 3) benchmarks for the subject: 'encourage students to engage with fundamental questions concerning the aims and values of education and its relationship to society'. Modules such as 'The Politics of Education', 'Education Systems and Social Change', 'Education, Equality and Identity', 'Knowledge and Ideology of Education', 'Education: Contested Values and Praxis' expressly set out with an unashamed purpose of promoting critical pedagogy. However, this should not be read as a form of romantic reflection on the state of modern youth and their lack of political consciousness while tutors afford themselves the privilege of enabling the 'emancipation' of others. Rather, critical consciousness in its Freirian sense is a complex and demanding enterprise in which self control and mastery of one's own education is a means to the empowerment and activation of one's own sense of learning (Freire, 1993 cited in Lee, *op. cit.*: 7).

For the authors of this paper such ideas resonate strongly with person-centred approaches (Rogers, 1961; 1980; 1994) and continue to be an important ideal in our day-to-day educational encounters and practices in the course. In particular, Rogers's emphasis on empathy as an acquired professional skill beyond personal attribute has significance in a developing framework of Education studentship. Ironically, it was Rogers's own loneliness as a young person which started his interest in helping others (Nelson-Jones, 1993), using it as a legitimate way of getting close to others. As already mentioned, our students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and some are non-traditional learners. Students' own experiences of school cannot be overlooked in establishing the attitude to learning that they bring into the Higher Education environment. Some may have experienced a level of 'academic' success in their post-16 qualifications, presenting their work according to the guidance given them by teachers, paying close attention to the criteria, writing formulaic essays, always relying on 'correct' answers. Such students may need strong encouragement to enter into debate, possibly even to speak out in class and can worry greatly when they do not receive prescriptive assessment guidance in completing coursework assignments. Some students may have had a negative school experience in which they have carried a legacy of 'failure' and have become the victims of classic self-fulfilling prophecies. They may have been encouraged by a friend or family member to return to study. Often they realise at some point in the first year that it was the system that failed them rather than vice versa; this can bring resentment.

Many students can flounder at first, but in a person-centred, stimulating and challenging environment they can eventually learn how to deal with the freedom to think for themselves, and success frequently follows. However, person-centredness does not stop with the student: a truly productive, stimulating person-centred environment would also include tutors. In other words, tutors need to model Rogerian approaches in their tutor-to-tutor relationships as well as tutor-to-student encounters. In such an environment,

If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. If, on the other hand, one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be in peril.
(Confucius, in Fisher, 2004: 197)

One student, in his forties, said in his third year, after achieving high marks across the Education programme, that he realised he had never been encouraged to think and ask questions before. He thought education was all about learning from people who were cleverer than him (teachers) and because he had been told by those very people that he would never amount to anything, he had accepted this. But in studying Education Studies he had been encouraged, and found the courage, to think for himself and was not afraid to ask questions and had found people, and books, who would answer his questions or lead him to finding the answers for himself. This encouragement to think for oneself is not a difficult or new concept and has been recognised for many years in the school context:

All which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned . . . is to develop their ability to think. (Dewey, 1916, quoted in Fisher, 2004: 5)

Towards a critical community of care

Whilst the ideas of personal critical development lie central to our purposes, we have been increasingly aware of the need for this to be developed as *community* practice. In her discussion of education programs for First Nation and Native American and Canadian communities, Tiffany Lee's (2006) arguments around Indigenous education and the emergent problems of critical pedagogy have some bearing on our own discussion. Drawing on what Smith (2003) calls conscientization (see also Apple *et al*, 2001: 131) Lee's *Critical Indigenous Pedagogy* involves 'freeing up the indigenous mind from the grip of the dominant hegemony' (Smith, 2003, 2 quoted in Lee, *op. cit.*: 7). Whilst Lee embraces the principles of individual democracy and freedom, she argues that a necessary commitment to *community* is absent in discourses around critical consciousness and critical pedagogy. Hence, a realignment of critical pedagogy is necessary to enable democratic notions of individual emancipation and liberation whilst maintaining a commitment to community social justice and transformation (Lee, *op.cit.*: 7).

An orientation to community is a critical imperative in our enterprise, as it locates an all important interface between studentship in the study of Education and Education Studies as an enactive preparation for educational practice in an 'out-there' world. An immediate corollary of this is to be found in Noddings's (2003, 2005) work on care, where she argues that authentic liberation and social justice can only be achieved by caring people in caring communities (Bergman, 2004). The relationship with Rogerian thinking here is, to all intents and purposes, empathy 'writ large':

we must receive the situation of the other as if it were our own. To do so requires emptying ourselves of attention to our own situation, at least for the moment, so as to make room to take in the existential condition of the other.
(Bergman, 2004: 151)

In her four features of the ethical ideal, Noddings identifies *modelling, dialogue, practice* and *confirmation*, and these indicate something of the professional challenge for the educator in Education.

- *Modelling* – demonstrable care, in which educational practice of care is fashioned in our day-to-day interactions with students at the level of both personal and system.
- *Dialogue* – at the centre of this lies knowledge of the other and reception of the other in a ‘common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation’ (Noddings, 1992: 23).

The correspondence of these features with concepts of freedom and emancipation drawn from critical theory is important here. Noddings suggests that ‘care theorists agree with Socrates that an education worthy of the name must help students to examine their own lives and explore the great questions human beings have always asked’ (Noddings, 1995, 191). However, she ‘would not declare that the unexamined life is not worth living’, but rather ask us to consider: ‘Is the unexamined life worth living? Should we decide this or others? How do we feel about our own?’ (Noddings, 1995: 191). Thus, the modelling of an educator’s ethical ideals might become the object of dialogue: ‘Is a tough teacher necessarily caring?’ Dialogue, then, becomes *the modus operandi* in the caring ideal in communication: as a stimulus to reflection, it is an especially powerful tool for promoting the building of students’ ethical ideals (Noddings, 2002a, 107).

- *Practice* – put simply, all students should be involved in ‘caring apprenticeships’ (Noddings, 1984:188, quoted in Bergman, *op.cit.*: 155.).
- *Confirmation* – in this fourth attribute Noddings argues that here we reveal the student herself/himself as an ‘ethical and intellectual being that has the power to nurture the ethical ideal or to destroy it ... When we attribute the best possible motive consonant with reality to the cared-for, we confirm him’ (Noddings, 1984a: 193, quoted in Bergman, *op.cit.*: 155).

These ideas hold a pivotal position in the thrust of an argument for Education Studies as preparation for new and evolving inter-professional work. This work, we argue, is increasingly distant to a retrospective framing of teacher education and, moreover, challenges the essentialism/instrumentality that surrounds the idea of the ‘re-modernised’ professional. For many the resonance with ideas around the Greek concept of *phronesis* [practical wisdom premised upon the disposition to act truly and rightly; ‘prudent judgment which takes account of what would be morally appropriate and fitting in a particular situation’ (Carr, 1987: 29)] may be all too apparent. Similarly, Trotman (2005) considers *Education* in light of two common interpretations: from the Latin *educere* - ‘to lead out’; and, also from the Latin, *educare* [*educatus*] – ‘to rear or foster’. In one sense this points to the powerful relationship between critical pedagogy and a community of care. Whilst, recognising the intrinsic value of educational practice as ‘an achievement of a tradition’ (Carr. *op.cit.*), crucially it invites us to (re)consider educational practice as one of *personal judgement and community responsibility* in ways that are likely to become significant as educational practice becomes an increasing multi-professional phenomenon. This, we argue, calls for new ways of re-imagining and re-visioning educational practice in the modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation of what it is to be a student of Education. This, too, carries with it a moral imperative on the part of those charged with the creation of a *critical community of care* to secure strategic, pedagogic and emotional ‘capacity’ in the student’s professional lifeworld – to explicitly enable, as part of professional education, what Woods (1995, 11) calls ‘strategic redefinition’: where educators find ways to redefine their work in line with their own professionally informed values.

Curriculum and assessment

Such aspirations, to have any level of authenticity, require that we continually to rethink the curriculum. They require a radical departure from the codified practices and state-approved curricula of initial teacher training programmes and a rebuttal of the instrumentality of 'key quality measures' that trespass on meaningful educational endeavour. In a post-modern appraisal of curriculum, Pinar (1998) calls for educators to reclaim the idea of curriculum (from the Latin root word *currere* - to run the racecourse) from its common contemporary framing in England as a static, pre-specified or mandated artefact, to that which is motivated by 'the unanticipated, the ambiguous, the complex, the strange, the queer, the incomprehensible' (Pinar, 1998: 84). The challenge is, then, to seek opportunities for strategic redefinition in which we, too, find ways to redefine our work in line with an emerging consensus of professionally informed values. In our pursuit of a mandatory level 5 module 'The Politics of Education', we have frequently found our curriculum and assessment design betraying the triumph of pragmatism that we have so readily sought to challenge: modules neatly packaged into ten taught sessions, a 3000 word assignment, an exploration of e-portfolios to ease the marking load, and so-on. This has necessarily required us to examine the imperatives of the politics of education (as distinct from the intended learning outcomes). This year's submission to our module approval panel will see a reduction in taught sessions to the introduction of five cornerstones of educational policy. Assessment has been redesigned as a group (collaborative and integrated) student production of a video documentary of a policy issue that 'matters' to them in *their* community – perhaps a first serious attempt to 'honour' an unfolding authentic critical community of care. With over one hundred students in each annual cohort it is not easy to sustain Rogerian person-centredness. Ironically, it is the use of virtual platforms that have enabled new approaches to the contextualisation of the personal (despite a continuing perception in some quarters that they impede the personal). In the development of a new employment focused module within the Combined Honours programme the use of blogs in Year One revealed the following thread - 'Lecturers Assessment Philosophies':

Hmmm... I am doing Education Studies with Theology and Philosophy. I have no exams throughout all of this, the most "exam-like" thing being a timed essay in Theology in the summer term. I am happy with this as, although I enjoy exams (sad i know!) it is more exciting to do presentations and assignments (if only we got them back grrrrrr) especially as we get to work with others.

I have finally sorted out my placement and, hopefully, i will be going to Church House, the home of Birmingham Diocese. this is really esciting [sic] as i hope to work in the future within the diocese.

This sort of contextualisation, we would argue, is a powerful tool in the development of a critical community of care that otherwise would be extremely difficult to access and manage.

Conclusion

The challenges that confront the identity formation of Education Studies are well rehearsed and we have alluded to some of them in this paper. Critically, for the authors of this paper, Education Studies is regarded as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that must have political, moral, ethical and community imperatives at its centre if it is indeed to be 'worthy of its name'. In such an endeavour of inquiry, Education Studies necessarily embodies the

attributes of progressive professional judgement, in which educational participants and practitioners come to exercise a form of contextualised, (as opposed to received) wisdom. As graduates of the *study of Education*, student enactment of *critical consciousness* lies central to this. As the professional landscape of educational work changes, studentship in education demands an ability to understand, participate in and evaluate new forms of community engagement within a framework of ethically centred educational practice. This will not only demand the acquisition of new professional educational skills, but necessitates a re-imagining of the educational professional and the professional attributes that shape educational judgement.

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