

Action research and postmodernism

Congruence and critique

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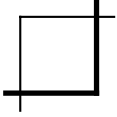
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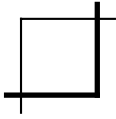
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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
Introduction	1
1 Emancipation and postmodernism	3
2 Research and the development of practice	13
Part 1 The hermeneutic backdrop: narrating the researcher	31
3 Creating data in practitioner research	33
4 Transitions: issues of temporality and practitioner research	57
5 On identity	70
Part 2 The postmodern turn – deconstructing the nursery classroom	91
6 From emancipation to postmodernism: a nursery study	93
7 A tale of disturbance	105
8 Identity, power and resistance	116
9 Deconstructing the nursery classroom: that will undo nicely, but so what?	132
10 Transgressive agents: an optimistic possibility?	150
Conclusion	167
11 Critical pedagogy in a postmodern world	169
<i>Bibliography</i>	185
<i>Index</i>	196



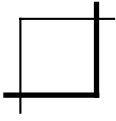
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Introduction

Emancipation and postmodernism

Failure in emancipatory projects

We shall begin with two anecdotes that highlight the issues we wish to examine.

Anecdote 1

One day Liz found herself reminding the children about certain school rules: 'no running'; 'no hitting'. A young girl, Keeley, responded by saying 'My mum says that on the street if anyone hits me I'm to hit back'. Liz found herself lamely replying, 'At school we don't hit'. In part, the proffering of such a pat response comes from not really knowing what to say to the child. In Liz's nursery and in nurseries generally the discourse of liberal humanism prevails so that children might become civilized and rational. It is for these reasons that traits such as 'caring' and 'being kind' are privileged. Yet in this instance there is a collision between the messages that the child is bringing from home and the nursery discourse. Liz's lameness is further compounded as her response seems to conflict with her desire for children to think critically and to adopt a questioning attitude towards certain practices – including whether rules are appropriate. But on what basis can one decide what is appropriate? To whom does one appeal for adjudication?

Anecdote 2

During the early 1980s Tony taught at a large comprehensive school in London. The school combined a 'progressive' approach to education with respectability in terms of the student intake it attracted, its results and attendance levels. This was at the time of

4 Introduction

Ken Livingstone's GLC (Greater London Council), when progressive methods had gained significant influence in London schools generally and in the university education departments which supplied many of their teachers. In the early 1990s, long after Tony had left, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) went in. They wrote a negative report and declared that nearly a third of the teachers were unsatisfactory. Perhaps the teaching force had changed during the intervening years, but more likely it was the broader conception of what constituted 'a teacher' that had changed. Such conceptions would appear to be time dependent. This anecdote in some ways echoes a recent account by Boaler (1997) in which it was claimed that a school adopting 'progressive' practices was significantly superior in its mathematics teaching when compared to a school that favoured more 'conventional' practices. Yet later it was the progressive school that was forced to change its methods after its own inspectorial visit by Ofsted.

These stories in some ways encapsulate the sort of difficulties post-modernist thinkers have with those assuming a more emancipatory quest for improvement in educational contexts. Any emancipatory perspective presupposes values which cannot be agreed upon universally or permanently. If we fight for something we are always working against someone else's interests and there are difficulties in creating a robustly moral perspective that will be seen as better by everyone. In saying that we are working in the children's best interests, what interests do we mean? The anecdotes pinpoint the dependency of conceptions of teaching on the ideological backdrop. Research into teaching, meanwhile, will always be premised on situationally derived assumptions. And whatever the findings of research, in many instances the researcher is unlikely to have the power or authority to have the final word.

Moreover, such research draws on an uneasy alliance of two alternative research perspectives: (a) the insider perspective of teachers focusing on their own actions; and (b) research motivated by attempts to influence policy across broader sections of the teaching force. It may work in my classroom, and perhaps even in the classrooms of the student teachers I work with, but it is a different matter making it stick as a national policy. Further, research agendas are not easily harmonized with conflicting assumptions and motivations held by different agencies, not least those assumptions built into the infrastructure within which education practices take place.

This book centres on reflexive work being undertaken by practitioner-researchers in educational contexts. It focuses on what is entailed when the move is made from common-sense understandings of what it means

to be a teacher, to a problematizing about and a careful examination of the tangled complexities which lie between knowing and doing. In building this account, we use past and ongoing research activities both from our own work and from people who have worked with us.

The book explores the notion of the 'teacher as researcher' seen as the framing of relevant aspects of practice in reflective writing which enables a move from mere description to an understanding of the intricacies of such descriptions. The book also addresses the ways in which social norms and structures work at coercing these descriptions. Such an approach, however, has the potential to lead not to the unlocking of complexity but to the elucidation of rigid preconceptions which serve only to confirm injustices of the 'found' world. Hitherto, action research has assumed a reality which can be uncovered and then altered in some way or improved upon for emancipatory purposes. This however begs key questions about where our ideas of what counts as 'improvement' come from. How can the researcher both 'observe' reality as well as being part of it and thus be implicated in its continual creation and recreation? These issues are much more complex than action research has acknowledged so far. We need to move beyond the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' to encompass poststructuralism which attends more to the way in which we construct reality. Our broader understandings of the flow of time, we suggest, are conditioned by the media through which we receive depictions of it. Newspapers, for example, create as well as report news. They have considerable influence over the way in which information about the present is processed and the form it has to take to be heard. Such media channels are instrumental in our everyday construction of the world in which we live. They are part of the shorthand we all employ in coming to terms with the complexity we face. In research we are in the business of creating a similar mediating layer with many similar characteristics, and are susceptible to varying interpretations of its function. Research may be targeted at finding out how things are, how things work, or be about describing the world in some other way. But we are always confronted by the unanswerable question as to whether our language is responsive or assertive. As researchers, are we saying how things *are* or telling people how things *should be seen*? In constructing validity criteria for our assertions, whose interests are we serving? In particular, what is reflected in reflective writing produced within practitioner research? We propose that we are more than passive recipients of our supposed mirror images, and that 'reflective' writing plays an instrumental role beyond mere reflection.

In this book we draw specifically on poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, language and meaning. Because it disputes the notion that language is transparent and does not permit either accurate expositions or

conclusive or definite explanations, poststructuralism allows the reflexive practitioner to see experiences, including those that occur within the workplace, as open to contradictory and conflicting interpretations. Language can no longer be relied upon for mastery or control. However, the book argues that while poststructuralism cannot give the practitioner-researcher control, it can nevertheless disrupt habitual and mechanistic ways of being. By adopting poststructuralist frameworks and by engaging with practices of deconstruction, attempts are made to break away from inappropriate and inadequate category systems.

We write at a time when education generally, but schools specifically, have been the subject of close government scrutiny and where teacher autonomy has been considerably eroded. We perceive writing this book as a move towards creating a space where we might articulate something of what it is to be 'a teacher'. We cannot presume to write what it is to be a child. What we can do, however, is write our way towards some understanding of our own complicity and culpability in relations of dominance against those that we would seek to empower. Effectively, this book is concerned with asking hard questions about our own practices, especially those which are ostensibly concerned with emancipation.

From emancipation to postmodernism

How then might school-based practitioner research enable us in capturing and guiding classroom practice? A premise of many teacher research enquiries undertaken within the context of award-bearing courses is that reflection on practice can lead to a development of that practice. Such reflection, it is purported, enables the practitioner in organizing the complexity of the teaching situation, with a particular emphasis on how 'monitoring change' can be converted to 'control of change'. For the teacher engaged in this style of research there may also be hopes that the research will result in 'better teaching' as well as a hope that the children may as a consequence of education have 'better lives'. This book questions the limits of our capacity to enter into *projects of action* (Schütz 1962) as intentional beings in this way, but acknowledges that we may suppose that we are such intentional beings and act as such. The book questions the track record of the notion of construing developing practice as 'aiming for an ideal'. The very desire for control, and the difficulties encountered in trying to document it, can cloud our vision against the very complexities we seek to capture, trapped as we are in socially derived constructions of the world we experience. Postmodernist analysis, meanwhile, offers opportunities to conceptualize the world in different ways. It insists on undercutting the foundations upon which notions such as empowerment and enlightenment rest, although some

argue that this may not necessarily be a threat to such notions (e.g. Carr 1995). We shall, however, see how our initial attempt at a reconciliation of the hermeneutic underpinnings of the practitioner research enterprise with poststructuralist analyses turned into a disruption of the initial assumptions as to the purpose of research, thus moving away from a somewhat rationalist focus concerned with effecting productive change through a systematic process.

The basic task of this book is to examine some of the difficulties encountered when seeking to reconcile a postmodernist style of analysis with the intentionality ordinarily assumed in practitioner-oriented research enquiry. Much research has been predicated on a modernist project of the teacher wishing to examine his or her practical relation to the professional situation they inhabit. Furthermore, this is often motivated by notions of empowerment both for the children taught and for the teacher themselves, and as a consequence the research seeks to uncover, critique and challenge the structural conditions which envelop the professional tasks being faced. However, theories of postmodernism and poststructuralism have impacted on recent work in the field of education, and in very many ways they cut across and work against these various concerns. The book examines writings produced within a variety of practitioner research enquiries taking place within the context of award-bearing courses. It explores the premises upon which such enquiries are constructed and questions the sorts of resolution that can be reached.

It would seem that what we are proposing is an unlikely match. On the one hand there is the notion of the subject who besides being stable and coherent can use powers of reasoning and rationality in order to understand the complexities of the world, including those which are embedded in teaching. This conception of the researcher finds favour within various examples of practitioner research paradigms. On the other hand, there is the fragmented subject, with its multiple selves, implied by poststructuralist theories. Given such incompatibilities, marriage between the two seems doomed. However, it is not marriage we are proposing. Rather, we perceive ourselves entering into a lengthy engagement with postmodernism. It is an engagement which finds the practitioner-researcher situated within the logic which circumscribes such projects. But, by incorporating theories of postmodernism into the research practices, we are obliged, we believe, to interrogate that very logic. In this way we show how the logic is no longer a satisfactory means for addressing the complexities of social life, including those that are within the classroom.

The chosen research instrument within this book is reflective writing produced by practitioner-researchers. We suggest that the researcher needs to be self-consciously reflective and thus that they need to be aware of

their own growth in this process. We prefer to argue for the centrality of the writing process rather than any supposed research process. It is through such a writing process we suggest that the researcher asserts and thus 'creates' themselves. This is rather like the psychoanalyst's client pronouncing from the couch who they are and the things in life shaping their sense of self. Such assertions or pronouncements provide frameworks against which we can choose to live our real lives. We thus understand the task of practitioner research as being targeted at producing a construction of self in relation to the professional/social context being faced. (Although most of the research to be discussed in this present volume is directed at personal and professional development, such a construction of self may still be implicated in research seeming to claim a more 'objective' stance.)

We ask how we might proceed in producing and understanding the reflective writing that might arise within such a process. Our premise is that the practitioner researching in their classroom brings about perceived changes both through acting in the classroom itself and in producing writing commenting on this classroom practice. That is to say, written descriptions of classroom practice, undertaken by the practitioner, effectively change the reality attended to by that practitioner. The writing generated in this process can be seen as both responding to past action and guiding future action. The practical knowledge derived through such a process is however both dynamic and provisional. In traditional action research there appears to be a supposition that the researcher stays the same during the research period. It also often seems that the world they inhabit 'stops' long enough for them to look at it and then act. We propose that changes in both researcher and world need to be documented within the writing process, since they are mutually constitutive. In short, in describing my classroom, I affect the way I see it, thus the way I act in it, the way I am and hence the way I subsequently describe it (since it has also been changed by my actions). In engaging in this circular hermeneutic process, teacher-researchers pass through a sequence of perspectives, each capable of generating various types of writing and each susceptible to a variety of later interpretations. However, this writing becomes detached from the person who generated it. It becomes a historical artefact susceptible to multiple interpretations as to its origins and its situation within the social sphere through which it emerged. While individuals can, if they choose, wed themselves to understandings of themselves as intentional beings as they act professionally and write about their actions, such understandings are always temporary; subject to reformulations and recontextualizations. Research enquiry can thus be revisited as a historical analysis of practitioners' writing, but a history that creates futures as well as presents and pasts (see Ricoeur 1984).

Chapter outline

The book continues with a development of these issues discussed in relation to a number of studies being carried out by teachers following masters and doctoral routes. After a brief review of the critical education foundations from which our own work springs we offer a more developed account of the hermeneutic underpinnings that provided the starting point for our discussion, discussed in relation to some teacher studies. We then offer a more detailed account of a project carried out by Liz in a nursery school in which a more poststructuralist analysis is introduced. We conclude with a discussion of how we might live with a compromised set of emancipatory values within a more postmodern frame.

Chapter 2 begins with an account of some of the factors shaping the practice of teachers in school and their associated work on university courses. It then explores the burgeoning of practitioner research paradigms within award-bearing courses for teachers and other professionals in education and the roots of this in the writings of certain key authors (e.g. Carr and Kemmis, Elliott). Such authors, it is suggested, seem to presuppose an essence (of a situation or a person) which can be revealed and improved. These issues will be discussed briefly in relation to key critical pedagogy theorists such as Freire, McLaren and Giroux. A more developed example is offered relating to feminist conceptions of emancipation. The discussion then introduces the work of Habermas, in so far as his work might be seen as underpinning contemporary understandings of emancipatory practice governed by rationalist principles. However, we then outline how postmodernism rejects the notion of a rational intentional being centred in a professional situation to be analysed and modified. We then ask how we might proceed in bringing postmodernist analyses to approaches presupposing subjects and situations in search of improvement.

Part 1 considers the hermeneutic underpinning of critical practitioner research strategies as exemplified in a research masters course for teachers. It then considers how reflective writing might provide an instrument for loosening the ties of overly rationalist research objectives. Chapter 3 examines how writing produced within school-based practitioner research can be seen as framing and guiding both classroom practice and the research process itself. It commences with a discussion of an emancipatory aspect of Habermas' work that has been influential in framing practitioner enquiry in education. It provides a brief account of John Elliott's Gadamerian objection to this approach in which *emancipation* is replaced by *evolution*. A masters course for practising teachers is described in which this objection is accommodated. This is based around a model drawn from Saussurian linguistics for analysing text, widely used by poststructuralist writers. In this model the meaning of the text depends

on an evolving relationship between the words within it. An analogy is drawn with practitioner research, which is characterized as the generation and analysis of a sequence of pieces of writing whose meaning can be derived through analysis of the relation between the successive pieces of writing produced. This model is employed as a framework for understanding, monitoring and influencing changes in practice. Examples of teachers' reflective writing from the masters course are used to illustrate alternative approaches to achieving such writing-led professional change.

Chapter 4 sets out to examine the nature of time and how it is constructed within reflective teacher research. The chapter is motivated on the one hand by a belief in evolving identity but on the other it acknowledges a world where such identities are collapsing into interweaving discourses where notions of such evolution are not tenable. It draws on the classic debate between Gadamer and Habermas concerned with how we experience our living in the present, either as a 'being in the world' or as an 'end gainer' aspiring to a new structural framework within which life will be unconstrained by reifications of oppressive relations. After questioning the notion of human agency that these views presuppose, the chapter pursues a resolution offered by Ricoeur and his subsequent work on the close relation between time and the stories we tell about it. Some work arising from a masters course for teachers is described in which attempts are made to reconcile practice with descriptions of practice. In particular, issues of the teachers working with their own earlier writings are discussed. It is suggested that such writings can be used to form a reflective/constructive narrative layer that feeds, while growing alongside, the life it seeks to portray.

Chapter 5 draws on Lacan's work in psychoanalysis in seeking to locate a model for the identity of teachers working on their practice. For Lacan the human subject is always seen as incomplete, where identifications of oneself are captured in an image: as an individual I am forever trying to complete the picture I have of myself in relation to the world around me and the others who also inhabit it. I respond to the fantasy I have of the Other and the fantasy I imagine the Other having of me. The mirror image I create of myself is built through successive interpretations in such exchanges. But these interpretations are in turn a function of the language we share. In the context of practitioner research, what version of myself do I feel comfortable with – what fantasies do I have about myself, the place I work, the people I work with and the broader social context within which this takes place? What story do I tell to justify my actions? How do I frame my plans and intentions? How do I understand and depict the discourses that interpellate me? What construction of self is implicated in the models of practitioner research offered so far? Extensive reference will be made to some writing produced by some teachers for their final masters dissertation and subsequent work to

illustrate how this psychoanalytical approach might be enacted as part of a professionally oriented research enquiry.

Part 2 centres on Liz's study based in a nursery classroom in which a fuller deconstructive unpicking of teacher research practices is offered. Chapter 6 introduces the conceptualization of the study which brought the two authors of this present book together. It discusses Liz's work in a nursery school and her attempts to find a way of defining the motivation underlying her own practices as a teacher. It provides an example of a transition from an enquiry rooted in emancipatory aspirations that becomes unstuck, forcing a questioning of the motivations assumed at the outset.

Chapter 7 continues to discuss the nursery study and illustrates some of the repercussions, particularly the advantages, of adopting deconstructive approaches to those meanings which are brought to an account of young children's play within a teacher research enquiry. In describing and interpreting an example offered here the objective is not to fix a definitive or accurate explanation to it. Instead, the ambition is to disperse rather than capture meanings, to offer multiple and open-ended interpretations and in so doing disturb the equilibrium of the reported perspective which gave rise to the account. Through such an approach, it is suggested, we can challenge ingrained ways of knowing and doing which inhibit opportunities to question 'authoritarian fictions' present in the way we often describe the learning of young children, which because they are habitual and collective, have come to be regarded as 'natural' and as 'truths'.

Chapter 8 centres on power relations as they are played out within the context of the nursery. Accounts which centre on the children's play are used to illustrate not only how power circulates but additionally how it might be both resisted or tampered with. Moreover, the writing illustrates how particular discursive practices have the potential to constitute individuals into particular ways of being. Nevertheless, by taking up different subject positionings, teacher and child alike can challenge and render fragile notions of power. It is just such a play of discourses which this chapter attempts to illustrate.

Chapter 9 takes time out to consider a number of questions including: (a) is the practice of deconstructing a responsible act?; (b) should playing with texts – that are themselves concerned with children's play – be taken seriously?; and (c) can educational research which produces bafflement rather than solutions be considered as research? In her efforts to address these questions Liz's first step is to offer a rereading of a boy's game. However, she tries to centre her attention not so much on the salient features of the game but on those things which are not 'precisely' present. Such a move provokes different perspectives and it is these which allow her the possibilities to ask 'new and different questions'

(Hebdige 1989: 226), a practice which is arguably an act of responsible research. Her second move is to examine why it is she has what could be described as a 'jackboot' response to boys' play with toy guns. Using a number of texts which are concerned with 'gun play' Liz picks apart her own investments in certain ideological positionings. Such aggravations do not offer a clear-sighted vision as to where to go next. Rather, Liz is left baffled and it is this which prompts the continual critique of practice.

Chapter 10 concerns itself with notions of 'agency'. Liz takes a brief exchange between herself and some of the nursery girls. Using this as a catalyst and working from a Foucauldian perspective she ponders on the possibilities of individuals becoming 'transgressive agents'.

The Conclusion, Chapter 11, asks whether it is conceivable for the practitioner to continue to hold on to notions of emancipation when it is no longer viable to appeal to the old grand narratives, including those of universal truths, objective science and reason. The chapter assesses the attempt made in this book to revisit and question the foundations of educational practitioner research. Taking our cue from Derrida (1994), we argue that it is possible 'never to give up on the Enlightenment'. But, as he cautions, this requires 're-reading and re-interpreting . . . to raise new questions . . . disturb stereotypes and good consciences, and to complicate or re-work for a changed situation' (p. 34). By drawing on the authors' base domains of nursery teaching and mathematics education research, our ambition is to illustrate how different conceptualizations of 'knowledge' and 'understanding' can open up the possibility for a 'changed situation'. We suggest that the narrative product of reflexive research might be seen as the aspirational voice that keeps emancipatory intention alive. Thus the chapter, through revisiting some of the authors' own specific professional concerns, highlights some of the strategies suggested for grappling with the complexities of researching educational practice.

1. Action research in education. 2. Postmodernism and education. I. Jones, Liz, 1950- II. Title. And whatever the findings of research, in many instances the researcher is unlikely to have the power or authority to have the final word. Moreover, such research draws on an uneasy alliance of two alternative research perspectives: (a) the insider perspective of teachers focusing on their own actions; and (b) research motivated by attempts to influence policy across broader sections of the teaching force. It may work in my classroom, and perhaps even in the classrooms of the student teachers I work with, but it is a different matter making it stick as a national policy.