

ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT WITH EDUCATION

Greg Heath

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

The task for educational philosophy and theory has changed. We all know this but find it difficult to articulate just how it has changed and where it is going. The changes are at once both subtle and obvious; at once directed from external necessity and from internal insight and critique. There is at the broader level an unsettling and almost eerie ambivalence towards education from all quarters. This is typified by the inconsistency between the rhetoric surrounding the need for a “knowledge nation” or similar idea and in many countries the lack of real action or investment in education in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In fact in Australia and New Zealand there has been a real dis-investment in education with real falls in the proportion of GDP spent on education. A small rise in private spending on education has not significantly compensated for a 20% reduction in public spending at least in the tertiary sector, over the past decade. This can be contrasted with real investment in many (non English-speaking) countries. Taiwan and Norway being two contrasting, but outstanding, examples. This is across the spectrum of education but with tertiary education, both vocational and higher education, being hit hardest.

At the level of public policy there seems to be a recognition of the importance of the ‘knowledge economy’ to prosperity and well being, but no real conviction reflected in a sense of urgency or public priority for education. To illustrate the point it has been widely commented on that despite the Blair government’s top three priorities of “education, education, education” and a higher education participation target of 50% not a lot apart from student fees and small decline in the participation rate has occurred.

Within education there is nothing short of a crisis; a crisis of confidence as much as crises of means. It is manifested by a predicament as to what should be taught and to a lesser extent as to how it should be taught and who should teach it. The content of the curriculum is a matter of pervasive concern, often provoking populist misguided calls for a return to basic numeracy and literacy skills. Yet teachers know that what children and young adults need is much more sophisticated integrating and critical analysis skills and personal values orientation to cope with the tide of what is often called informal learning that swamps the mainstream of the school curriculum.

The problem is patent but the answer much less clear. The answer, I am sure we could agree, lies in being clear about what sort of people we want the next generation to be and what we want them to know. But here a Wittgensteinian mental cramp sets in; we are frequently not sure how to respond to this basic question. This is caused by a number of factors now influencing the formation and transmission of knowledge, but not least by the decentring of reason and the de-epistemisation of learning. At its core though, is a radically individualised notion of the self as this incredibly light being feasting on the smorgasbord of information and experience to cast and

recast a chameleon self of appearances and reflections which were once thought of as the province value systems and social institutions. The well understood and foundational links between discovery, knowledge, teaching and learning that have for millennia placed educators and educational institutions at the centre of society in various ways are at least under question if not actually disintegrating as Bill Readings (Readings, 1996) has claimed. The value structures that have underpinned education and universities are now not widely held within society. The value structure underlying the knowledge professions has been turned on its head. Experience, consistency, disciplinarity and certainty are now often seen as encumbrances and disadvantages. Flexibility, adaptability, innovation, trans-disciplinarity and (creative) ambiguity are now the desirable individual and institutional characteristics.

Underlying this is a most disturbing element. The element is that it comes to be seen that engagement or commitment to a set of values or beliefs is an undesirable characteristic; an inhibitor of change and fluidity. Disengagement, commitment to private rather than public causes, is seen to be desirable as it is seen to enhance ready adaptability and capacity to commit to current corporate goals or short term policy objectives. "There is no long term" could be seen as the motto of flexible capitalism.

It has been observed by many commentators such as Martin Woollacot in the Guardian, that since September 11 disengagement has become the "biggest game in town." There is a retreat from the public to the private sphere and an attempt to shut out the hostile external environment. One notable reaction has been a great feeling of vulnerability and uncertainty. So many of my acquaintances have said that they are never going to get into a plane again and I think a few of them won't. There is a feeling that the world is becoming less controllable and that nothing governments, weakened by the forces of globalisation, can now do can prevent malign random events such as these. What we see, of course, is no more than an acceleration of a long term trend and is a reflection of the broader socio-political trends of late modernity. The retreat to the private sphere is as much a desire to achieve a location in a controllable and predictable world as much as it is an attempt to retreat from the threats of an increasingly uncertain and radically unpredictable public sphere. And of course by the laws of reflexivity this retreat only increases the risk and the likelihood of a more unpredictable and potentially threatening public sphere. Salvation through society becomes even less likely and faith becomes more readily transferred to the household deities.

For educators who have always been committed to the production and dissemination of personally and socially useful knowledge this is serious. Just what is personally and socially useful knowledge is not clear. Worse, what is likely to be socially and personal useful knowledge in the future is not predictable. This is not to say that educators and philosophers of education should not be asserting what ought to be personally and social useful knowledge. This is a duty of the profession and it is clear that knowledge that leads to a socially and enviromentally sustainable world or a stable and integrated personality is to be valued. What has changed is the social, economic and political environment in which educators work. This change is driven by the forces of globalisation and the dis-engagement of governments from the direction of the broad educational policy process.

One unfortunate consequence is that the philosophy of education itself is under threat. Just as it

becomes more essential than ever philosophy of education struggles to find a place in schools of education which blindly presume that the “big” questions are either irrelevant or have all been settled. The challenges of the new learning create an urgent demand for critical reflection and analysis. The history and sociology of education have suffered the same fate.

Before considering what this might mean for knowledge and the commitment of educators I would like to consider briefly some factors in the changing landscape.

The first of course is globalisation. This a compound and contested concept which despite its redolence is not very useful for analytic purposes. We are familiar with its manifestations and consequences which have accelerated exponentially post the cold war. One feature of it that I would like to draw attention to here is the shift from agency to dependency. This can be seen by contrasting the idea of universalising knowledge, as we have always done, and still do with the idea of globalising knowledge. Universalising knowledge, the traditional global role of educators, is being supplanted by globalising knowledge in which the educators become agents or mediators. Globalisation largely disempowers the educator and the learner. I have recently seen the term ‘knowledge broker’ surface in discussion papers to characterise what academic teachers will be doing in the all to near future. And in the same discussion consortia of universities as forming a “knowledge exchange” based on the model of a stock exchange. This is certainly challenging.

The other side of globalisation is localisation. It is in the tension between the local and the global the local that new empowerment of educators arises. Freed of the domination of the nation state educators have the opportunity to establish their own critical knowledges and voices in a new mode.

As the forces of globalisation weaken the thrall of the nation state different types of identities emerge. The self of personal identity becomes more fragmentary, diffuse and malleable. Such a self is seen to be desirable or even necessary to survive in the world of fast, global capitalism. Keeping one’s being light and flexible is the moral imperative of this new world. Radically supplanting the traditional values of a substantive and grounded being. Anthony Elliott opens his recent book *Concepts of the Self* (Elliott 2001, p1) with reference to a competition called “New Self” on a popular radio station. The gist of the competition was that the contestants would phone in and tell on air of their most embarrassing or compromising situation. The one judged the “grand loser” gets the prize which is a personal makeover at the expense of the radio station. The new identity consisted of a new car, clothes, hairdo, body -via the gymnasium, etc. Elliott reports that the competition was very popular and the prize hotly contested. It is a nice illustration of the change in the underlying principles and values of identity formation. Greatly liberating, but in stark contrast to the values that have underpinned curriculum and pedagogy from Plato to Peters.

What this illustrates is that the subject of education, the learner, has changed and the expectations of education have changed. We might or might not agree with this proposition at a many levels including the ontological, but it stands as a defensible sociological proposition that the “new self” that educators must accommodate is one that values liquidity over substantiality, relativity over objectivity, diversity over unity and rationalisation over reason. The teacher-learner

relationship is no longer a from teacher to learner role nor even a mentor to mentee role but something rather different. Rather what we have is more like a customer to client relationship where the teacher is expected to act as a resource to meet the needs of the learner.

There are some welcome aspects to this model, particularly for mature learners but there are also some serious problems to which I will return later in the paper.

Linked to globalisation is the incremental individualisation of post-modern society, so well articulated by Bauman but described much earlier by Richard Sennett and David Harvey. This is again largely a consequence of the neo-liberal ideology of “fast capitalism” manifested by the consumer society. Whilst producing an unreflected conformism it, at the same time, undermines the traditional consensus generating role of the state. In this environment we each become responsible for generating and re-inventing our being. There is no salvation through society because in the infamous words of Margaret Thatcher “there is no such thing as society”, in her view, only a collection self-interested individuals or in the views of some postmodernists, only a collection of constructed and reconstructed individual narratives.

Here there is also the retreat from the idea of social consensus, or a failure of the social contract. A social contract that in one way or another has included universities and the education sector. Under the conception of the Kantian and von Humbolt model of the university, universities had a complex relationship to the state. Kant’s plea in *The Conflict of the Faculties* was that the Prussian university be founded on the principle of *reason*. Reason here would have to be autonomous as outlined in his wider philosophy if it was to lead to truth and freedom. This of course was a very dangerous idea in the Prussia of the late eighteenth century (and still is today in a different context). Kant attempted to curtail the potentially revolutionary force of the idea by a fairly dodgy distinction between public and private reason which had the consequence that public use of reason could not be used to overturn public order. Wilhelm von Humbolt built upon this idea. For von Humbolt universities were to be based on a model of practical reason that is secular, discipline based and dependent upon a conception of universal knowledge. The university, as we have conceived it up until now, was defined by von Humbolt as an enterprise based on the freedom of inquiry and expression, involving a partnership between teacher and student, founded on a Kantian version of the autonomy and sovereignty of reason. Universities have been, to date, the preserve of free inquiry, independence of scholarship and the keepers and transferrers of knowledge.

On this model there was implicit or tacit agreement that the state would support universities as autonomous institutions, respecting academic freedom, if the universities stuck to the public use of reason and supplied with the state with its cognitive needs and a supply of well trained but politically compliant professionals.

This situation held for the best part of two centuries. The compact started to break down in the 1960’s as a result of three clear factors. First, the protest movements which took what Kant would have called the “private use of reason” to the streets. Secondly, the mass demand for higher education which required a different order of commitment to the compact from the state -a commitment with which the state has not been comfortable. And thirdly, the development of new cognitive demands by a globalising corporate sector. Demands with which neither the state nor

the universities were entirely comfortable nor readily able to meet.

What we see now, in the English-speaking world at least, is breaking down of the compact between government and universities to compact between corporations and the university. In this compact government is one of many clients of the university and one of diminishing importance. Universities and schools are subject to the same ideological and socio-economic forces that have driven the privatisation of many public services.

What holds here for universities can also be extended more and more to the school sector in Australia.

Zygmunt Bauman in the *Individualised Society* (Bauman 2001) says that we have entered a period of “meta-change”. That is the ways in which change occurs is itself subject to rapid and unpredictable change. Further, the process of rapid change carries with it the prospect of even greater uncertainty in the process of change. This is caused by many factors, some technological; no one planned or foresaw the Internet, some due to globalisation; no one can predict the incidence of terrorism, and some by changes to economic and political organisation and control. But also to changes in the very conception of being, not least the acceptance of multiple and discontinuous concepts of the self. If we knew now what sort of self we might have to become in 5 years we might start or at least plan for it now but it is a feature of reinvented selves that we rarely see the demand for reinvention coming. It is a manifestation of “meta-change” that the very planning for an outcome can, influence or change the intended outcome. In an organisational context this can be seen where planning for change, changes the organisation that it is intended to change. This is even used quite cynically in some organizations as a control mechanism by promoting the turmoil of constant change. Such a dimension of change is one element of what Ulrich Beck has referred to as ‘reflexive modernisation’. Survival, let alone flourishing, in a period of meta-change requires a whole set of newly adaptive skills and “knowledges” which do not sit easily within established theories of education. Yet it is only with philosophers and theorist of education that the profession and the community is able to conceptualise and communicate these new ways of knowing and learning.

The economy, if not the substance, of transcendence has been transformed.

When it comes to universities and education this can lead to nothing short of a sense of imploding chaos and crisis. This is because their role as custodians and disseminators of knowledge has relied on an ordered or structured process of what was seen to be incremental and progressive. Change was mostly, although not always, in the form of progressive and cumulative development of which they, along with members of other key social institutions, were the authors and controllers. Much of the status, not to say the satisfaction, of being an academic was being in control of the knowledge process. If knowledge is power then the creators and controllers of its means of distribution were the masters of the universe. This is now all changing. There are many more sources of knowledge, many more users of knowledge and many more purveyors of knowledge. This leaves universities struggling to define just what it is that is unique about them and justifies their continued support from taxpayers money. The scope of this dilemma can be illustrated easily from many sources. For instance by the fact that the worlds largest pharmaceutical company, Smith Kline Beecham spends as much 2 billion pounds per year on

research and development, many times more than the entire Australian research spending, private and public. And more worrying, by the fact that many large corporations are establishing their own internal 'universities' for staff training and development. This spills over at times to grateful university sector such as Deakin Prime that contracts to undertake Coles-Myer staff training or Melbourne University Private that is attempting to do the same type of thing with spectacular lack of success so far.

I contend that much of what is depicted here amounts to a retreat from, and a disengagement from education and the learning process and its humanising and civilising aims. There is the disengagement of the state from responsibility and accountability for education. There is the disengagement of the individual from the process of learning for any other than short term, narrow interests. And there is crisis of confidence in public education, reflected within universities and the whole education sector. And there is conflict and deep misgivings as to the values and directions of education as a whole. This is illustrated again on many fronts and no more starkly by the difficulty encountered in many countries, most notably Britain, Germany and now France of attracting and retaining recruits to the teaching profession.

Yet I believe there is good reason to be optimistic and proactive within this context. It really is a most exciting time to be involved in education. It is not only that case that adversity is the mother of invention, but the new modalities of knowledge and diversified institutional basis of education presents a much richer context for the development of reflexive theory-practice developments. This can be seen if we recognise that we are moving from a reason centred foundation for knowledge to a communicatively centred basis.(see Heath 2000). On this view knowledge is founded on the grounds of agreement between (well intentioned) communicators. It has a reflexive, intersubjective basis which is at once subject to a public process of critique and justification but which can also cope with diverse and sometimes mutually incompatible foundations. It can accommodate difference but yet be legitimate and subject to critique. On this view bridge is forged between the processes of communication and knowledge formation.

Knowledge has never been so important to personal, economic and social success. Most universities will survive as institutions in the public sphere and their importance as key institutions will be enhanced. But the process of transition from the modernist state focussed model to a postmodern semi-autonomous corporate model will be painful. Clearly, I believe it is the responsibility of philosophers and theorists of education to have a major role in guiding the process. Their presence will certainly ease some of the pain, for others at least.

Some of the traditional values remain central. The assertion of the importance of knowledge for its own sake is these days likely to label one as an intellectual dinosaur and lead Deans to place one's name at the head of the "departure lounge" list. However, there is of course an essential element in this which is a core, defining characteristic of universities and a basic commitment of educators. It is that the purpose of knowledge is ultimately to serve human interests as such and not just the, quite properly, vested interests of corporations and private individuals. Another of the traditional values that remains central is the commitment to be critical. Whilst asserting this may not directly lead to the departure list it is likely to lead to life membership "not for advancement" club. But again so clearly articulated by Ronald Barnett in *Higher Education: A Critical Business*, in an age of knowledge abundance the unique role of higher education to

develop reflexive critique and is a key factor distinguishing universities from other knowledge organizations. I would contend that this is not just the role of higher education but also of school and vocational education where these capacities are crucial for success in coping with the super complexity of the postmodern globalising world.

This brings me to a sketch of what I think it is that will re-engage with education. It is not a new idea, but might need some new clothes. It was certainly present in Dewey and is developed in various ways by Barnett, Michael Peters and many others. Perhaps the philosophical foundations lie with Husserl's transcendental phenomenology in *Ideas I*. It is the idea of what Gregory Bateson called "tertiary learning" (see Baumann 2001, p124). This is the capacity to deal with epistemic diversity, to impose or even create inner logics which make sense of discontinuous experience. At another level it is the capacity to remain centred at the same time as constantly self-reinventing. It is also a concept of learning that can deal with the "new production of knowledge": that is can receive and synthesise knowledge which comes from diverse sources and in diverse modalities.

Primary learning can be characterised as basic learning of skills or facts, secondary learning, what Bateson called deuterio-learning, is the familiar "learning how to learn" of most advanced modernist models of education. But tertiary learning is a highly sophisticated process, which incorporates but goes beyond critical reflection, which requires a deep understanding of epistemology, and the human sciences and advanced pedagogy. It is a mode which can incorporate both primary and secondary learning but has much greater heuristic power. It is at once an acceptance that the world and the place of self within it has changed. There is no going back on globalisation or the postmodern shift. But through tertiary learning there is the opportunity for the capacities of critical reflection, analytic thought and theorising that can provide, not so much the theories and conceptual schemes familiar to modernism, but furnish the debate, provide the contexts and frameworks for discussion, debate and policy formation.

As Wittgenstein says of the role of philosophy it shows us 'how to go on', when it seems that there is no path.

References

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