

The Study of Education

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In 1996, a collection of essays edited by J.W. Tibble and titled *The Study of Education* was published in the UK. This contained contributions on philosophy of education (R.S. Peters), educational theory (P.H. Hirst), history of education (B. Simon), psychology of education (B. Morris), sociology of education (W. Taylor). In 1983, three of the same authors (Hirst, Peters, Simon), together with J. Nisbet (educational psychology) and B. Davies (sociology of education, contributed to a further collection on the same theme. This was edited by P.H. Hirst and was titled *Educational Theory and its Foundation Disciplines*. The first book traced the historical development of education as a field of study in Britain and sought to establish for it the kind of academic standing enjoyed by other disciplines. The second sought to advance this purpose by reviewing the “major shifts in contents and methods” that took place in the contributing disciplines in the years since the Tibble collection, and to develop a domain of principles to guide educational practice. In the Introduction to the 1983 book, Hirst wrote:

The nature of educational theory as such, rather than organisations of it for teaching purposes, and the contributions to it of what continue to be the major disciplines on which it draws remain fundamental issues. It is these that are addressed in this collection. (Hirst, 1983, p.2)

Both books proceed from a pair of epistemological assumptions – one implicit and one explicit. The implicit assumption is that the study of education requires theoretical foundations. To make that assumption explicit would also bring to the foreground the question “Why does it?”. The second, or explicit assumption is that “educational theory is necessarily dependent on the development of a series of contributory disciplines with recognised academic roots quite outside educational studies” (Hirst, 1983, p.1).

Although, in the quarter century that has elapsed since the publication of *Educational Theory and its Foundation Disciplines*, epistemological controversies in the humanities and social sciences have critically weakened the “foundation disciplines” approach to the study of education, the twin assumptions just mentioned still remain influential in departments of educational studies in universities. This triple workshop offers perspectives on the study of education from three philosophers of education who share a critical stance towards the “foundation disciplines” approach to educational studies; a stance that not only takes account of the emergence of postfoundationalism but also acknowledges that the study of education is first and foremost the study of a human practice, or a constellation of practices (as distinct from a phenomenon, or a biological process, or a technology). This is not to suggest that uniformity should prevail in educational practice itself, or in the forms of study that seek to yield more incisive and advanced understandings of such practice. The arguments offered by the three contributors to this workshop reveal their own differences. Despite these differences however, each of the contributions will seek to move beyond a critique of the idea of “foundation disciplines”, in order to provoke an open discussion about how the study of education should be understood when it is no longer constrained by foundationalist assumptions and when the integrity of education as a practice is fully recognised and preserved. The study of any human practice requires at least this.

First Contribution: Wilfred Carr

This contribution begins with a critical historical review of the approaches taken by Tibble et al. in 1966 and by Hirst et al. in 1983. It challenges the twin assumptions of educational theory and also their

influential consequence that the study of education comprises, in the main, the four “foundation” disciplines of educational psychology, sociology of education, history of education and philosophy of education. In particular it argues that the two main tasks put forward by the dominant approaches to educational theory as envisaged by Hirst have identified crucial issues, but also that educational theory thus envisaged has misconceived these issues from the start. These two tasks are: (a) to identify epistemological foundations for the study of education that would enable educational practice to be built on rational principles that are more objective than inherited belief or unexamined practice; (b) to replace the context-dependent, subjective beliefs of practitioners with the context-free, objective knowledge generated by theory.

Following these opening critiques Carr’s contribution makes a critical appraisal of “reflective practitioner” and action research approaches that rose to prominence during the late 1980s as dissatisfaction with “foundations” approaches became more widespread. These new approaches gave prominence to practice rather than to theory and drew on a wide range of post-positivist or anti-positivist arguments. They produced a wide variety of orientations towards the study of education, most of which nevertheless shared a conception of theorising in education as a species of “practical” or “personal” theory; a kind that emerged through a process of “self-reflective inquiry” in which educational practitioners reflectively exposed and critically examined the theories implicit in their own everyday practice. Carr argues that, for all their merits, these new “reflective” approaches to the study of education lacked an epistemological acuity or precision that was evident in the earlier approaches of Hirst and Peters. For instance, practitioners’ frameworks of beliefs and understandings were granted the status of “theory”; or more precisely, there was frequently a failure to distinguish between practitioners’ articulation of beliefs that underlie their practice and their allegiance to some particular theory.

Carr’s arguments then focus on questions which the institutionalised history of the study of education has itself largely helped to eclipse. Such questions include: What are the epistemological sources of what has customarily been called educational theory? Does the widely-held view that theory should guide and inform practice apply at all, or apply differently, to the field of education? Should a practical activity like education be based on anything going by the name of theory? In pursuing these questions some key challenges posed by post-foundationalist insights are addressed. For instance, if, as postfoundationalism insists, there can be no perspective that is independent of a contextually-influenced interpretive standpoint, does this conclusion itself re-invent a new form of foundationalist educational theory? Carr’s contribution will conclude not with definite answers to such challenges, but with some suggestions about how a more clear-sighted living-with them might bring a greater degree of genuine enlightenment to how the study of a practical activity like education might be understood.

Second Contribution: Pádraig Hogan

This contribution starts by arguing that major twentieth-century critiques of traditional currents of thinking in metaphysics and epistemology – e.g. those of Wittgenstein, Dewey, Heidegger, Arendt, Gadamer, Davidson, Foucault, Benhabib – have decisive consequences, but under-explored ones, for how education as a field of human endeavour is to be understood. Notwithstanding the many substantial differences in the works of authors such as these, they invariably underscore the point that even the most “primordial” understanding is already pervaded by preconceptions. Lessons to be learned from these critiques include the futility of seeking an all-encompassing, or completed philosophy, and the fruitlessness of the search for pristine or unshakeable foundations for reason and its exercise.

In most of these recent philosophical explorations the emphasis is on the everyday, or untutored happening of understanding in human experience; and chiefly in contexts that are literary, or ethical, or historical, or political, or legal, rather than in contexts that are explicitly educational. In such latter contexts the emphasis would be on a deliberate form of action: the *sustained promotion* of understanding

through teaching. This is an important shift of emphasis – from an investigation of the inescapable features of understanding as it spontaneously occurs in experience to an enquiry which now also includes a focus on what might *most defensibly be practised* as teaching deliberately intervenes and engages that experience. While a traditional epistemological standpoint might see this as an illegitimate shift from an “is” to an “ought” (from the domain of facts to the domain of values), Hogan’s contribution argues that it is more properly characterised as a recognition that something of an “ought” is always embodied already in the “is” of any human practice, albeit in an often unacknowledged, or mistaken, or inconsistent way. To argue a case for the contrary, as David Hume and many generations of his followers have done, is to set thinking on a philosophical track that methodically – but also mistakenly – attenuates humans’ understanding of human understanding itself.

Proceeding from this, Hogan argues that an exploration of humans’ understanding of human understanding itself must lie at the heart of the study of education as a discipline of thought and action. The health or otherwise of the field of educational studies will depend largely on the importance given to this central concern and also on how adequately investigations of this central concern are undertaken. When such studies are undertaken with at least a minimum adequacy they reveal some features of education as a practice that aren’t often made properly explicit, either in what informs the actions of practitioners themselves or in what informs the enquiries of scholars in the field of educational studies. Such features include: (a) an integrity, or distinctiveness of purpose (i.e. that education is an undertaking distinguished by its efforts in bringing about, from childhood onwards, progressive advancements in humans’ understandings that nurture capacities for later, more autonomous forms of learning; (b) the embedded effects of history (i.e. that education as a practice is invariably laden with inherited attitudes and institutionalised habits that have often predetermined how understanding itself, and its advancement through teaching and learning are to be understood; (c) the finitude as distinct from omniscience of human exploratory powers (i.e. that a “culture-free” and “time-free” understanding of education, though arguably desirable as a corrective to the ubiquity of bias, is probably unattainable, and in any case might miss much that is of inestimable importance).

To accept the consequences of points such as these is to propose that an exploratory-cum-fallibilist stance is the most defensible and the most promising for the study of education; viz. a stance that informs one’s own learning efforts and also one’s understanding of how learning is best brought about among others who are differently disposed and circumstanced from oneself. Hogan’s contribution will conclude by highlighting in summary some practical consequences of these arguments for the self-understanding of educational practice and of scholarly investigations of that practice.

Third Contribution: Morwenna Griffiths

This contribution largely shares the critical stance of the two other contributions to the presuppositions that have underlain the dominant conceptions of educational theory in the later twentieth century. But it also calls on the resources of feminist philosophy to bring more explicitly to light the unannounced ways in which predispositions concerning matters of gender, race, class, sexuality and disability influence how education as a practice comes to be understood and carried out.

Griffiths starts with a view that the study of education is itself a practice and is also a study of practice: the practices of both teachers and learners. She argues that practices are socially rather than individually constructed. She starts by outlining a view of practices, drawing on both philosophical and social learning theories (especially Collins, Brown and Holum, 1991, Lave and Wenger, 1991, Smith, 1999, Burbules and Smeyers, 2002,). She then seeks to improve and expand on this view by presenting a critique of it, arguing that it pays insufficient attention to embodiment, diversity or power. The critique draws particularly on feminist philosophy, especially Fraser (1997), Battersby (1998), Young (2000), Greene and Griffiths(2003), and Le Doeuff (2003). The critique shows that any practice is properly seen as fluid, leaky and viscous. It changes and is changed by the social context. In particular, it is affected by

both the diversity of its members and also the power relations between them. Griffiths argues that any practice benefits from recognising diversity among its members, because such recognition encourages the acknowledgement of different models of expertise. Further, she argues that the effects of socio-political structures on the practice need to be taken explicitly into account, because of the way they construct diversity.

Griffiths argues that this understanding of practice has particular implications for educational practices: the practices of teachers and learners – and also of educational philosophers and researchers. Educational practices are necessarily related to getting knowledge and increasing understanding. Orthodox conceptions of how this occurs are challenged by a conception of educational practices as constructed by the various, diverse predispositions related to gender, race, class, sexuality and disability. She draws on the idea of an educated public (MacIntyre, 1987) which contributes to a “democratic intellect” (Davie, 1961). In eighteenth century Enlightenment Scotland, academic debate conducted in the universities reflected and exchanged with discussion in society over the best way its members should live, for instance in the many clubs and societies in existence at the time. In such discussion, return to first principles made differences sharper but it also made real agreement possible. It enabled thinking for oneself to be done in a public non-specialised context in which general social interest and concern for the common good might be freely expressed.

In its original form this is a Scottish Enlightenment idea, in which the “educated public” were centrally the male professional classes (although there was at least one women’s contribution, the Fair Intellectual club). Griffiths argues (against MacIntyre) that the idea of the democratic intellect can be amended and re-claimed for a more broadly based understanding of democracy. She argues further that the use of the term “democracy” draws attention to the moral and political implications of educational practices. Knowledge that is constructed and framed by a wide social group will be more likely to draw from a range of perspectives. Further, the implications for wider society of constructions of knowledge will be clearer.

Constructions of knowledge will inevitably have social, moral and political consequences, whether or not such consequences are acknowledged or intended. One example of such consequences can be found in current policy and practice in lifelong learning. Official pronouncements on the value of lifelong learning typically produce statements such as the following from the Council of Europe, (2002)

Education and training are an indispensable means of promoting social cohesion, active citizenship, personal and professional fulfilment, adaptability and employability. Lifelong learning facilitates free mobility for European citizens and allows the achievement of the goals and aspirations of European Union countries (i.e. to become more prosperous, competitive, tolerant and democratic). It should enable all persons to acquire the necessary knowledge to take part as active citizens in the knowledge society and the labour market.

This kind of wish list is hard to argue with. However, as has happened so widely in many countries, the emphasis has been on the knowledge society and the labour market – as is demonstrated by the summary of actions taken by the Council since they made the statement (Council of Europe, 2002). An emphasis on employability and the knowledge society has created competitive individualist education policies, which depend on a view of knowledge as instrumental, individual and disembodied. It is a view which bypasses moral or political considerations. A view of education as competitive and individualistic works against a democratic intellect. It may increase “professional fulfilment, adaptability and employability” but is unlikely to further “social cohesion or active citizenship”.

An education that understands and acknowledges itself as a social practice has more hope of contributing to a just social order as well as to a thriving economy. Griffiths concludes by returning to a major figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith. Most explicitly in his *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue*

and Arms, he argued for an economics that was founded in moral principles and a just society. Such a society would need, she argues, to be founded on educational practices which understand, acknowledge and use the diversity of that society.

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