The Problem of 'the Problem with Educational Research'

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Abstract

This paper takes up the question of the way in which 'the problem with educational research' is represented. It takes as its point of departure two recent views on 'the problem' – one expressed by an educational journalist and one presented by the Australian Council of Deans of Education. It locates these within a larger frame of international debate about educational research and its problems and considers how these arise out of particular dispositions towards educational research and, by extension towards, education itself.

The paper suggests that the different positions on the problem with educational research, and hence on the solution to the problem, fail to engage in the question of education itself as a problem of the present. It argues that this problem is produced through twin fantasies about education: a redemptive fantasy about the possibility and the imperative for education to solve problems of social disadvantage; and a disciplinary fantasy that faculties of education can do this by themselves. Through an examination of the 'de-sciencing' of education in the past decade or so, and its recent 're-sciencing', the authors conclude that, with all the problems that might be identified that pertain to educational research and to faculties of education, the most significant might well be a failure of research imagination. Overcoming this problem demands engagement with provocative ideas coming from outside traditional educational expertise.

Introduction

In February 2005, an article appeared in *The Australian* newspaper, entitled 'The Problem with Educational Research' (Buckingham 2005, p.18). The brevity of the article and the identification of educational research as having a singular 'problem', was enough to capture the attention of time-poor, long-term educational researchers, among whom the authors include ourselves. The problem, as Buckingham articulates it, is that 'educational research is often far from sound'. The reason she gives for this view is the current preference within education faculties for producing qualitative rather than, and at the expense of, quantitative research. The fact that only two percent of Australian Research Council grants targeted educational research in 2004 is given as evidence of its 'poor reputation'. Most educational findings, Buckingham argues, are 'based on case studies or small sample sizes' and so are of dubious scientific value. The call she makes is for more 'data-intense, statistically valid' research, which, she argues, though 'expensive', will make for more 'solid' foundations for 'evidence-based teaching'. Simply put, Buckingham argues for a restoration of 'big numbers' to its rightful place as the cornerstone of educational research.

At the same time that Buckingham's column appeared, the Australian Council of Deans of Education was preparing a submission to the Research Quality Framework Issues paper. Like Buckingham, the Deans acknowledge the low funding base of educational research but their take on this is very different from hers. They name a 'serious decline in educational research funding and effort' brought about by 'the combined effects of general under-resourcing of the area' and 'a fairly malevolent set of de facto research measures based solely on a limited theory of knowledge production' (ACDE 2005, p.12). 'Educational research', they claim, was 'once a proud feature of Australian research' but is 'flagging under current policy' (p.8). This situation would be exacerbated, they assert, if any future measures of impact do not take into account the extent to which 'action research project[s]…impact on school practice', and the extent to which 'a range of other productivities…impact on Education's professional world' (p.11). They conclude that 'a light touch that employs a wide set of quantitative indicators but above all makes use of peer assessment through appropriately constituted panels' is the most appropriate way to proceed, with Education as a 'distinctive category' (p.8) of disciplinary review.

These two accounts represent distinct and even oppositional views on 'the problem' and, it follows, on 'the solution'. They are most clearly intelligible as articulations at two ends of a set of available positions on the matter. The first is readily located as a recent example of a consistent educational agenda in the national press over the past years, where 'the problem' is construed as potentially solvable through increasing intervention by government through large-scale testing and measurement. 'Evidence'

in this situation is to be assembled for purposes of comparison and ultimately greater market choice in terms of school selection, curricula, pedagogy etc. The ACDE position, in contrast, is perhaps best seen as the latest voicing of the call for recognition and intra-communal disciplinary self-regulation.

None of this is new, at least in terms of the broad alignments in the face of the latest articulation of crisis in the field internationally. For over a decade key journals such as the *Educational Researcher* have been publishing increasingly explicit discussions about the problem with educational research. Carl Kaestle's 1993 article 'The Awful Reputation of Educational Research' has itself gained something of a reputation, being deployed in the rhetorical work of naming and framing 'the problem' and posing 'solutions', such as the intensely pragmatic and hyper-rational 'engineering' solutions of Burkhardt & Schoenfeld (2003). Meanwhile, the promotion of de-politicised ethical solutions continues unabated (see Hoestetler 2005). What is clear from all this is that there is broad agreement that research ought to lead to improvement, but much less agreement about what improvement ought to look like. What is also clear is that such arguments have been well-rehearsed over significant periods of time, and are adept at naming their enemies and allies.

In showcasing the polarity of views between Buckingham and the ACDE in the Australian setting, our intention is not to name either as enemies or allies. We refuse any neat positioning, notwithstanding the fact that it remains a relatively easy thing for educational researchers working in universities to reiterate a range of familiar conceptual and moral locations. It is an almost too-easy matter to simply re-instate the lines of defence constructed by 'legitimate' educational leaders (ie, university deans and their professional bodies) and frame interested journalists as, at best, misguided and misinformed and, at worst, the enemy outside the walls. At the same time, it appears similarly easy to continue to engage in the 'intra-communal disputation' over points of theory, method or politics neatly re-articulated by Burkhardt & Schoenfeld (2003).

What we *are* concerned to do in this article is to draw attention to the shared investment each of these stakeholders has in the importance of educational research to our shared future. This implies a commitment to the idea that more or better knowledge about education has the potential to deliver better educational outcomes. In turn, each sits squarely within a frame that takes as given the potential of education, once it is configured correctly, to ameliorate 'real social disadvantage' (Nelson 2005). The argument we wish to make, however, is that both of the above articulations, and similar lines of argument, may actually be preventing us from thinking about education itself as a problem of the present.

One of the ways to address this problem of the present is to focus on the policy context framing debates within education, particularly in light of the fact that the federal scene is moving so fast at present, following global developments around assessing the quality and impact of research in general and educational research in particular. While we acknowledge that this context matters, we are seeking to address a matter which is in many respects internal to the culture of research and research training in faculties of education. Our reason for doing so is to understand how faculties of education have been caught up in particular contestations over method and how these contestations have come to count in the broader university.

To do this work, we make a number of key moves. First, we suggest that education itself is the subject of two parallel fantasies that need to be articulated and made available for different kinds of work. We then go on to examine educational research as a site for the production of particular kinds of dispositions to knowledge-making about education. To do so is to see the current frames within which the debates and lines of argument are drawn as themselves products of disciplinary histories and investments. We sketch the problem of scientific inquiry and its advocacy, noting the effects of the 'de-sciencing' and 're-sciencing' of education on the recent political positioning of faculties of education. After considering the imperatives from governments to produce more directly policy-relevant research, we conclude by arguing the importance of moving beyond the polarities exemplified in the above accounts by way of engaging with larger debates within a broader scholarship.

Twin fantasies

A major line of argument on this paper is that competing claims made about what educational research *can* and *should* do are founded upon twin 'fantasies' about the nature and purposes of the educational enterprise itself. These fantasies are themselves located within the histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century schooling and of the university in shaping the society, the culture and the nation. Most recently they have come into play in terms of an increasing reach of policy in shaping the educational agenda. We use the term 'fantasies', not to be dismissive of collective or individual hopes for a new and better social order to be achieved through education, but to indicate both the seductiveness and elusiveness of that hope.

The first fantasy is the hope on the part of governments and societies that education can and should ameliorate social disadvantage whatever the prevailing political reality and the economic conditions. This 'redemptive fantasy' permeates educational histories in Australia such as those tracing the literacy debates where we see evidence of a steady escalation of public debate since the 1970s about literacy and standards

(Green, Hodgens & Luke 1997). Such research demonstrates an increasingly tight and anxious linking of education, especially literacy, to a vision of social improvement. In turn, literacy and educational standards are symbolically connected with an escalating climate of general crisis and change in Australian society and transformations of culture and the economy. Education here offers the extravagant promise of delivering transformative social benefit at the same time as its institutional presence, its practitioners and its advocates are increasingly held responsible for the failure to deliver on the promise.

The second, related, fantasy is that education as a field, a discipline or an institution, can deliver transformative learning outcomes *of itself*. This fantasy of self-identity of education links to the project of its disciplinarisation within the university during the second half of last century (Green & Lee 1999). The work of education, historically, has been twofold: both scholarly inquiry into the field *and* the pre-service preparation of education professionals. The former was typically located in departments in faculties of arts in the older universities, while the latter was carried out in the teachers' colleges that were originally part of the state departments of education. The former relied on the 'foundation disciplines' of philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, etc, for its growing disciplinary project. The latter struggles with paradigmatic status in relation to the indexical questions of the practice of the profession – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Education's current problems of definition and standing has been attributed, at least in part, historically, to the tensions between these 'pure' and 'applied' dimensions of the field (Fisher et al. 1999, Middleton 2001). More recently, Lee (2005) raised issues of the blurring of old boundaries between school and non-school education wrought through global political, economic and social changes. Yet the common identification of education as a discipline or professional field with schools and school teacher education has continued to limit the terms upon which education faculties can resource debate on the role of education and learning. Education has been 'de-territorialised' through the global imperatives of economic reform and the restructuring of work. Discourses of knowledge economy and lifelong learning speak to the expanding boundaries of 'the educational' in terms of the increasing 'pedagogisation' of social life (eg Andersen 2002). This creates a kind of no-space for education, which applies to 'everywhere and nowhere, everybody and nobody' (Vitebsky 1993, p.100).

Both fantasies – that of the redemptive potential of education as a symbolic ideal and that of education's paradigmatic autonomy and maturity – serve to disconnect the domain knowledge of educational research from the conditions within which the work is performed. Where education is perceived as both separate and separable

from socio-economic realities, but also from other knowledge domains and forms of cultural practice, then disappointment is likely to continue both for deans of education seeking more government funding and for government bureaucrats seeking social 'solutions' through education.

We suggest that this problem is exacerbated if and when education is insisted on as a 'distinctive category' (ACDE 2005, p.8) in any future review process. While such a stance is pragmatically understandable when taken by deans of education on behalf of large numbers of educational academics, it is predicated on and perpetuates the assumption or belief that education is a domain of knowledge production that can and should be held apart from other knowledge domains in order to do its best work. It is intimately connected to the project of disciplinarisation and paradigmatic self-identity.

Yet this proposition – that education works best when held separate from other disciplinary domains – is one that can no longer be understood to go without saying. If, as Castells asserts, we can no longer speak of *the social* without speaking of *the technological* (Castells 2001), then it may be that we can no longer speak of the educational without speaking of a set of social dynamics that are intimately connected with developments in ICTs, creative design, health and well-being, environmental sustainability, and so on. It may well be that the implications are more profound than simply looking to increase the number of interdisciplinary research projects in which faculties of education have become involved.

Sense and sensibility

Whether actively seeking more interdisciplinary engagement or not, education faculties continue to be sites for the production of particular kinds of dispositions to knowledge-making about education, through the mechanisms of doctoral training, research funding, promotion, etc. In this sense, these trainings have directly shaped the conduct of current debates about educational research, including those articulated in the introduction of this article.

It is a truism of education faculties that what counts as 'good research' is neither static nor agreed (see Yates 2004). Having said this, we note that the last decade or so has seen a broad consensus as to how current debates about educational research are to be conducted, and in some respects an end to at least the last generation of the 'paradigm wars'. Those who once clung to the hegemony of a positivist science have either departed the field or have re-positioned themselves to take advantage of their now increasingly rare sets of empirical research skills. Others – the majority of full-time academics employed in faculties of education – have been differently

enculturated during the nineties through what Patti Lather (1996) calls a 'qualitative hegemony'. The impact of this change has been profound.

An Australian Federal Government Report into educational research at the end of the millennium indicated an increase in both interpretive and participatory research, and a decrease in large scale quantitative studies (DETYA 2001, p.6). Of the qualitative studies that were undertaken to that time, there was a trend to 'small highly focused qualitative studies' that sought to 'address…educators' problems' (p.6). This paralleled the trend in higher degree research in education; postgraduate students had a very clear preference for qualitative studies over quantitative. In postgraduate research, the pattern appeared to be that topic and methodology were 'largely driven by individual choice, based on interest and personal belief about the value of the work' (p.7).

More recently, data about HDR education theses compiled for the Centre of Learning Innovation in the Faculty of Education at QUT indicates that qualitative methodologies have clearly maintained their preferential position, while quantitative studies have remained decidedly out of fashion. It is interesting to note, however, the more recent emergence of 'mixed method' research, whatever that term might connote in terms of design. The table below sets out the picture more clearly. In the period 2003 to 2005, a total of 136 theses were produced in education schools or faculties in Australian universities. Of these, over 50% (76) were qualitative, one third (46) were mixed methods, and only 3 percent (5) were quantitative, with four (4) not education-related and a further five (5) unavailable for review.

Table 1: HDR Thesis Methods Education (2003-2005)

Year	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed	Not available	Not education or education related	Total
2005	4	0	3	1	0	8
2004	29	2	19	2	1	53
2003	43	3	24	2	3	75
Totals	**76**	**5**	**46**	**5**	**4**	**136**

Given these figures, one might expect the trend to 'mixed method' to continue but not, it would seem, at the expense of qualitative methodology as a stand-alone approach and with no impact on the decline and fall of quantitative studies. So whether or not we are seeing an emergent interest in some combination of measuring and interpreting, the trend identified in the DETYA Report (2001) to qualitative projects seems set to continue.

This enculturation into a 'qualitative hegemony' has occurred in a relatively short period of historical time, in disciplinary terms. Testimony to the recency of this trend in major international publications in the field can be found in the content of major compendiums of educational scholarship as the four *World Handbooks on Teaching* that have been published since 1967. Indeed, the last ten years have seen an acceleration of this new legitimacy for qualitative and/or multi-method research in educational research publications, for example, *The Australian Educational Researcher*. What is apparent in this last decade of publication is that qualitative work has captured the research imagination, and has dominated the agenda, *at the expense of* measurement, as a preferred mode of explanation of social phenomena on the part of the current generation of educational researchers.

Coupled with these trends, the practices of doctoral training in educational research have by and large been individualistic, in keeping with a more 'monastic' tradition in which individual candidates meet in the private offices of individual academics to be supervised towards successful completion. The long-term tradition in the sciences of doctoral research being conducted as part of a larger project around which a number of scientists are gathered in a team has not been followed in the main, even in quantitative projects. It is only in recent times in Australia, and with resistance in some quarters, that higher degree research and its supervision has become a more publicly managed domain of activity. In a post-Kemp environment in which funding is more specifically tied to timely completion (see Kemp 1999), we have seen a great deal of forensic activity that seeks to make transparent whether and how higher degrees are risk managed (see McWilliam, Lawson, Evans & Taylor 2005). While this forensic work has certainly flushed supervisory practice out of its private and individualised settings to some degree in faculties of Education, it is not a mechanism that has been designed to shift a culture of individualised research projects to one that is team-based. In light of the preference for assessing research outputs through research groupings composed of a few high impact individuals (RQF Expert Advisory Group, September 2005), however, it may well be that publicly funded research education will focus more narrowly on a small student elite within distinctive research concentrations.

Where research is 'largely driven by individual choice, based on interest and personal belief about the value of the work' (DETYA 2001, p.7), we might anticipate, in some respects at least, that the promise of a more humane education is alive and well. Moreover, such a climate can serve as an unprecedented invitation to many who might not have seen themselves as potential researchers to be involved in researching their own practice, given that one's individual practice is now understood to be a valid object of systematic inquiry.

Education has of course not been alone in taking this 'phenomenological turn'. Health workers and social workers have likewise looked increasingly to address the effects of excessive medicalisation that has been perceived to be born out of an over-reliance on statistical and clinical research (see Reissman 1992). 'Understanding the patient', like 'understanding the child', has come to be thought as best done through a different kind of knowing that was made available through different kinds of data, including data that pertain to the researcher's own subjectivity.

However, what enables, as we know, also constrains. The individualising and personalising of educational research may well have had an important democratising effect and broken down some of the more dysfunctional barriers between university research and the professional practice of teaching. Yet at the same time, this movement has delivered two further consequences that present major challenges to the field as it is currently constituted. The first is the erosion of possibilities for doing things incrementally or building databases systematically over time. As Lyn Yates (2004) puts it, 'the ability to build in some systematic way on what has gone before' has been compromised (p.23). We return to this issue later in the paper. The second is the difficult matter of bringing together a private world of 'experience' and a public world of methodological validation. There has of course been much active interest in the ways in which claims can and ought to be made to mitigate what David Silverman (2000) critiques as 'sez you' logic for validating subjective inquiry, including the more radical suggestions of psychoanalysts such as Drapeau (2002) who recommend the undertaking of personal introspective work through psychotherapy in order to address these difficult issues. However, it is precisely these issues of validity and reliability that continue to dog the public face of the field, as evidenced in reports such as Buckingham cited at the beginning of this paper, and as defended so anxiously by the Australian Council of Deans of Education in their RQF submission.

De-sciencing and re-sciencing education

Notwithstanding such cautions as Silverman's, the phenomenological turn in the social and human sciences has continued to shape sense-making in the discipline of education itself. What now serves as meaningful accounts of learning have been fashioned increasingly out of theories that perform two functions that are perceived to be missing from measurement. They purport to bring forward for scrutiny both a deeper internal world of human being and a powerful external world in which learning (as transference or as cognition or as social practice) takes place. The idea that we can best know the world of human activity through measuring that world is no longer thinkable, even for those who once understood clinical trials with control groups as the alpha and omega of research method. At the very least, there is an acceptance across the social and human sciences that 'thick data' can and should

augment 'objective testing' in the interests of producing better knowledge about human conduct and capacity. Put bluntly, Skinner is out. Lave and Wenger are in.

Renshaw's (2003) teleology below maps this trajectory away from a certain fantasy of the clinical experiment – of manageability and controllability through clinical testing – towards a fantasy of authentication through 'letting situated voices speak'. In simple terms, research that is able to capture the inner world in a 'real world' location is deemed to have more and better explanatory power in terms of the provision of educational opportunities.

Table 2: Selected theories of learning in the 20th century (Renshaw 2003, p.360)

Theory of Learning	Central Metaphor	Key Process
Behaviourist	Shaping & Moulding	Conditioning
Developmentalist	Adaptive Organism	Equilibration
Information Processing	Computer	Information Capacity
Meta-Cognitive	Executive Manager	Self Regulation
Sociocultural	Community Participant	Appropriation

This table is presented as a heuristic of the changes within learning theory since the end of the Second World War, to be read downwards in chronological sequence. Renshaw's purpose is avowedly not to explain how learning theories 'evolved' but rather how the core ideas of each theoretical approach found favour within the educational research community at different points in history. However, the table does indicate systematic moves away from positivist science and the clinical experiment that have been supported and encouraged within the discipline of education. While Renshaw does not seek to make this point, nor to endorse it, this *de-sciencing* move, we argue, this tale of moral and ethical progress in educational research, has become a moral project in itself. Its demonisation of 'white-coat knowing', its ridiculing of 'lies, damn lies and statistics', its rejection and caricaturing of testing – indeed, of measuring of any kind – has now become part of the common sense of the progressive education academic. Thus, concerns about the ways in which 'reductionism' feeds determinism – technological determinism, or social determinism (see for example, Dahlberg 2004) – have filled spaces that were once given over to preoccupations with statistical validity, sample size, control groups, variables and so on.

Once 'reductionist' becomes an accusation rather than an application of a particular logic for systematic inquiry, then science itself, condemned as it is to reducing the fullness of human experience and the non-human world, is compromised. Scientific method becomes vulnerable to accusations that it erases human complexity and diversity through its neat, coldly detached and deceptive stories. And once this is established, the moral-ethical work of the qualitative researcher becomes the quest to remediate quantitative research, coming down from 'the knee of God' (Eisner 1988) in order to engage with and on behalf of marginalised others. Qualitative research becomes invested with the task of delivering on the moral-ethical promise to build a more democratic and just educational and social order.

According to Patti Lather (1998), this moral-ethical promise is enacted as a growing demand for educational research to be 'centered by such concepts as 'empathy', 'voice' and 'authenticity'' (p.1). The problem that she perceives arising out of this demand is one which has also been identified by Tom Popkewitz (1997) and Deborah Britzman (1997) – namely, the 'wish for heroism' on the part of the researcher. For Lather, this wish is accompanied, problematically, by the presupposition of the researcher as 'a coherent subject…in charge of their desires and identifications', one who 'speaks for themselves' and is 'capable of knowing others' (Lather 1998, p.1). According to Britzman, the 'typical investments and categories of ethnography' which accompany inquiry as a redemptive project are a problem, as indeed is any ethnographic research that responds to 'the demand for voice and situatedness' (Britzman 1997, p. 31). Despite these complex and important critiques of qualitative inquiry, there remains a persistent and troubling binary logic structuring thought about educational research from within education's disciplinary walls. Quantitative/qualitative methodological oppositions themselves rest upon questionable epistemological distinctions between explanation and understanding. More troubling is the pragmatic reduction of 'science' in these oppositions to the question of method. In this sense, quantitative method is conflated with science, and the 'heroism' of the qualitative researcher identified with an anti-science humanism. The implicit teleology that can be read from (even if not intended by) Renshaw's table cited in the previous section is that of progressively more 'enlightened' theories of learning up to the apparent closure of a 'present', represented unanimously by socio-cultural theory. This narrative of progress promises a delivery of educational research from the limits of a positivist science.

Yet the contemporary moment is not so readily represented by this unanimity. There are, we suggest, at least two powerful indicators of a kind of 'return of the repressed' that need to be added to the picture. The first of these is the emergence of 'new' sciences of learning that are absent from this account. These include biological, neurological, cognitive and systems sciences that proffer theorisations of learning

drawing on the resources, not only of computer imaging and other technologies, but of extrapolative theorising from disciplinary bases other than the traditional 'foundation' disciplines of education (see, for example the *Journal of Learning Science*). The erasure of science in the recent history of educational research, and its conflation with questions of method, has led to a failure or refusal to attend to the specificity of emergent research undertaken under the sign of 'science'. Yet there are serious intellectual as well as strategic and pragmatic reasons for suggesting that educational researchers ignore these developments at considerable risk to the longevity of the field.

The second indicator is that of the increasing reach of government into the conduct of education. Current debates about educational research are shaped increasingly in relation to questions of policy and funding. And while educational research seeks at once to defend its epistemological distinctiveness and to claim its share of the funding, it is more and more overtly being called to task for its inadequacy in dealing with government needs to address large-scale social problems.

Policy relevance and research

For the policy-maker, 'good' research is research that can be relied on to provide a solid evidence base for future social investment. This sort of research, in broad terms, is expected to be both big in scale (ie, broadly representative) and applied in character, utilising cross-sector, interdisciplinary collaborations that can address multi-faceted community problems on the ground, rather than building domain knowledge for its own sake. Simply put, governments want the sort of research that tells them how and where to invest resources to optimise the capacity of policy to mitigate social and economic ills.

In the UK, for example, despite all recent efforts to reduce the numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), the percentage of 16 year olds who fit the NEET category has remained virtually unchanged in recent years. This is a serious matter for the National Government, not just because this group has an increased likelihood of unemployment, poor health and criminal activity but also because their lifetime costs to government coffers are estimated at $7billion in resource costs and $8.1billion in public funding (Maguire and Rennison 2005, p.188). It is unsurprising then that governments might want from social and educational researchers some quite specific, evidence-based directions for engaging this target group.

It is here that the absence of a systematic data base of educational research comes to haunt faculties of education. It is not that no-one has an opinion about such matters. Faculties of education are replete with academics who can theorise the relationship between education, society and the economy. Nor is it that we do not have a plethora of studies of the why and how of youth marginalisation. What we have been unable to do, however, is to offer collective, definitive direction to governments of any persuasion beyond a predictable call for more funding, and/or yet another iteration of failure and disappointment. This sort of response is evidenced in the ACDE's insistence that educational research is 'flagging' because of the combined effects of 'under-resourcing' and 'malevolen[ce]'. (ACDE 2005, p.12). What we can do, of course, is to rehearse our arguments for the importance of *not* having a unified view, and the need for governments *not* to trust those who do.

It is clear that the Australian Federal government has little patience with this sort of response, valid or not. The former Education Minister, Brendan Nelson's criticisms of faculties of education as 'quasi sociology departments' (in Maiden 2005, p. 4), and his expressed determination to wrest education back from 'the educational bureaucrats and ideologues' (in Doherty 2005, p. 1), are testimony to this fact, as well as to a growing mood at the federal level in Australia to step around university processes in order to overcome 'the real social disadvantage…that is…not having competent teachers' (Nelson 2005, p.12). Nelson promised that the 2005 inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training would 'get to the heart of…teacher education' in order to 'consider who is training the next generation of teachers' (p.12).

Imagining otherwise

Any notion that some entity other than an education faculty might be charged with the responsibility for pre-service teacher preparation is, naturally enough, anathema to those who have a commitment to this idea, the most vociferous of whom we might expect to be the deans themselves. While there is clear evidence to suggest that deans of education currently welcome new partnerships and an increase in interdisciplinary activity within and outside their universities, they are likely to draw the line at any loss of the teacher education project to an outside entity, just as they could be expected to balk at radical reworking of faculty boundaries within the academy. Any blurring of boundaries to date by way of restructuring the domain of education into super-faculties has certainly been perceived as a retrograde step on the part of those educational academics who have been restructured, and those who have witnessed this from afar. Another blow to the status of education, another failure to perceive its true worth. The prevailing political mood within faculties of education is thus very much a defensive one, on guard against encroachment or devaluing. Opportunities

are being actively sought for new collaborative partnerships, but these partnerships must not threaten the separate identity of educational research and the faculties within which it is conducted.

Despite the lack of enthusiasm of the Australian Research Council to fund educational research in general, there is ample evidence forthcoming from the annual AARE Conference and similar national symposia that innovative research and teaching *is* happening in faculties of education. What we have failed to do is to systematically move to *mainstream* those innovations in the interests of education's stakeholders. The 'thousand flowers' era has been exciting but it is not sustainable, either for those who are pushing on with their pet project or the handful of people who benefit from it. Not only does this wear people out, but it does not allow up-scaling into shared agendas and commitments across large scale projects like teacher education. Rushing to the field to study the perceptions of a handful of people about an aspect of their educational experience is unlikely to bring much to bear by way of a systematic mapping of newly emergent social processes. They are also unlikely to challenge the way we organise and think our domain knowledge. And they are most unlikely to impact on the making and unmaking of government policy.

Education is not alone in being criticised for failing to provide clear and unambiguous diagnoses of problems on which to base policy decisions. While educational research has, with cultural studies, borne the brunt of added criticism of self-indulgence and shonky-ness in terms of research design and analytical rigour, it joins other domains of knowledge production in the social and human sciences, and the 'pure' disciplines like mathematics, physics and so on, in suffering the slings and arrows of policy irrelevance. What is perhaps in the long run less forgivable and more destructive to educational research as a domain of inquiry is a failure of imagination – that is, the lack of a capacity to perceive that some of education's most cherished habits may be, in Zygmunt Baumans's (2004) words, 'too tightly embraced', so that they 'burden the present… and in the long run disempower…as [they] empower…in the short' (p.22).

It is our contention that we may need to do more, and to risk more, in seeking new productive coalitions for education as a knowledge domain. Put another way, we contend that 'the problem with educational research' may well be, in the final analysis, the limitations that exist within faculties of education to *imagine* other futures beyond current discrete disciplinary walls. Furthermore, it is possible to see this as a product, in many senses, of a lack of capacity to imagine new objects of investigation and new ways to develop a research agenda for education.

There are many provocations to imaginative educational research that emanate out of new social and cultural theory. What opportunities might arise if we were to engage

with Bauman's (2004) assertion that, at a time he calls the 'liquid social', learning itself is no longer the key to success? How might we want to explore Charlie Leadbeater's (1999) claim that what holds people back from taking risks is often as not their knowledge, not their ignorance? How might we make use of Richard Florida's (2002) contention that closed systems that operate out of traditional notions of accountability and performance expertise are unlikely to lead to spectacular success either in wealth creation or in social renewal. What implications might there be for curriculum and pedagogy arising out of Lawrence Lessig's (2001) assertion that, in contemporary forms of knowledge production, the user becomes the producer? None of these writers are in education faculties, and none of them are educational 'experts', but all of them are making claims that have great significance for higher and further education, for schooling and for learning. These claims might be usefully investigated more fully, in order to support or refute them.

At the same time that social theorists are contemplating newly imagined futures, we have seen a burgeoning interest from neuro-science in the physical basis of the mind. While in the recent past, interest in activities of the brain has been somewhat limited to repairing 'damage' through rehabilitation and recovery, neuro-scientists like Susan Greenfield have ranged much further in their explorations, mapping out imagined futures for the brain/mind relationship. In 'Tomorrow's People: How 21st Century technology is changing the way we think and feel' (2003), Greenfield sets out an agenda that is as relevant for educationists as it is for medical scientists. Her depiction of the increasing capacity of the nano-sciences to break down mind/brain distinctions provides one platform for the 're-sciencing' of learning, in order to understand better notions of 'individuality' and 'experience' in the context of human/machinic convergence.

This type of 're-sciencing education' project was very much in evidence at the 12th International Conference on Thinking held in Melbourne in July 2005, where Greenfield was one of ten keynote speakers, only *one* of whom hailed from the field of education. It is worth noting that the number of school teachers who were registered at this conference far outnumbered the education academic registrants. Hundreds of Victorian school teachers are evidently looking beyond the orthodox educational disciplines to source new ideas about learning and teaching. In looking outside their own intellectual backyard, these members of the teaching profession also call into question the 'great divide' that has been perpetuated between faculties of medicine and faculties of education in university structures, the former with their elite status and high levels of funding, and the latter anxious and uncertain in terms of both. While we are not naïve enough to suppose that faculties of medicine would share our enthusiasm for cross-disciplinary convergence in the service of learning *and* well-being, we also anticipate that the very different social futures our children

will live will make a nonsense of such simplistic disciplinary boundaries as those we spend so much time protecting.

The issue of how faculties of education sit within a larger university structure is therefore not unimportant. But what is perhaps more important still is the extent to which educational researchers can plug in to larger scientific challenges, intellectual shifts and public debates. What, for example, might we want to contribute to debates around human/machinic convergence? How might we better understand the newly emergent interplay between genes and environment? What might we learn from good web designers about curriculum design? How might we promote knowledge building for sustainability? How might we utilise Indigenous knowledge to improve mainstream leadership and management practices in schools and elsewhere? Perhaps, ironically, the problem is that we educational researchers are spending too much time speaking to each other and writing for each other, and so re-affirming our 'special' position as educational experts. It may be that this will require a new 'attentional economy' (Taylor 2005) in which the priority is not our domain knowledge, but what we might learn from beyond the discipline. In Leadbeater's terms, this means exploring ways of being usefully ignorant rather than continuing to insist on the intrinsic value of our knowledge and expertise.

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