

DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY

Piper, H and Stronach I (eds) 2004 *Educational Research: Difference and Diversity* (Cardiff Papers in Qualitative Research)
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This collection of papers on educational methodology are drawn from two conferences, 'Realism, Relativism or Post-Modernism' (1997) and 'Feminism and Educational Research Methodologies' (1999), suitably updated and with additional material. The overview and introduction are given in the *final* chapter, with separate text from each editor side by side in two columns. This overview is critical, even 'rude' (Piper's word) so as not to seem to be sycophantic. Manners might be a barrier to truth, whatever that may be. There are interesting points made – academic writing as a gift economy, writers offering expertise free but for professional esteem (selfish selflessness, selfless selfishness); the proprietorial invention of 'named approaches' that researchers hope will catch on and be often cited; 'micro-fascist' academic regulations and publishers' house styles; the purpose of debate being to win rather than grapple with multi-layered truths.

I will nevertheless start this review with a general evaluation, that I am glad the book was brought together and have spent many happy hours and days delving, agreeing, disagreeing, being astonished, being outraged but always being intellectually challenged. Books of educational research methodology are not always so entertaining. It is not a handbook for beginning researchers but what we might call (in tone with the book) 'a squabble of educationalists'. Sometimes the civil war is based on the tiniest of disagreements, as in the realist/relativist debate. The *JBV* reader will be interested in issues of truth, reality and relativism, voices and perspectives and experience of oppression. As educational researchers we are also interested in how and whether various qualitative and interpretative methodologies can claim to produce valid knowledge.

Liz Stanley works towards a 'toolkit' for the feminist researcher in a face of critiques which are discussed. A central issue is how the feminist researcher can claim to create unbiased 'knowledge'. In an anti-positivist approach challenging the so-called objectivity of science, she draws on Gouldner's reflexivity on situated knowledge, and on phenomenology, constructivism and interactionism to create a praxis involving analysis, ethics and politics, which avoids being polarised either into theory/research or investigation/action, and is capable of changing 'hierarchies of inequalities' referred to as 'oppression'. She talks of

'accountable knowledge, with differing competing truth claims; she is interested in the process rather than the findings, 'moral epistemology' (equity in dealing with competing voices). She concludes, feminist theorists "need to be competent methodologists every bit as much as feminist methodologists, carrying out all styles of research and using whatever methods, must be fully attentive to matters of interpretation, analysis and argumentation, and thus be competent theoreticians." (p.26).

In 'Hermeneutics: A Poetics of Inquiry' Thomas Schwandt emphasises that our main task is to understand "the other", whether this be people or practices. He separates knowledge creation (via valid methodology) from understanding and meaning making, for which he points to forms of hermeneutics. He draws on Charles Taylor's 'speech partner model', drawing meaning and understanding out of discussion, debate and sharing of interpretations, with speech partners which he widens to include texts or events with which we can have virtual conversations. Dialogue does not mean two conflictual monologues (the 'debate'), but should be an attempt of each to understand and come to terms with the other. We experience others as someone with something to say, creating dialogue across differences, rather than winning. 'Pluralism' becomes part of a search for meaning and understanding, but not as a defensive or polemical neurosis. He describes dialogue as 'Socratic midwifery', bringing new ideas to birth through discussion. Rejecting confrontational models of debate, understanding and insight is he claims more related to artistic appreciation: "The act of understanding is more like an aesthetic experience...we look to a language of the poetics of inquiry" (p.41). Reaching these kinds of understanding is an "artful experience" different from scientific experimental models.

On the relativism/realism debate, John K Smith argues, in 'Learning to Live with Relativism' that we construct knowledge which does not exist independently, so we have to be satisfied by the current level of our understanding, subjectively encountered. Knowledge is multi-perspectived, plural and diverse. We have to get used to there being various ways to describe what we call 'reality'. He sees epistemological constructivism as not compatible with ontological realism. However in 'Get Real: A Defence of Realism', Martyn Hammersley defines knowledge as that which we hold to be true beyond reasonable doubt, whilst also pointing to the impossibilities of removing all doubt. He sees this as an issue of whether the stories told by researchers are true or false, and invites a discussion of what true and false might mean. To argue as constructivists does not, he claims, require us to give up all aspirations to be investigating reality, however relativist some of our judgements have to be.

Three chapters focus on academic feminism. Sara Delamont 'Confessions of a Ragpicker' deals with Somer Brodribb's charge that feminists pick up 'rags' from 'the bins of male ideas', agreeing that postmodernism is patriarchal but wishing to support her own methodological and epistemological arguments from men's research where appropriate. She uses a story, a reflection, an autoethnographical fragment, a dialogue, a poem, and a credo. She argues against narratives and interviews, preferring observation as a valid tool rather than the biased and impressionistic things people say, especially when small numbers are selected. One or few voices should not dominate: multiple perspectives should be taken into account. It should be recognised that reality is messy. Her dialogue with different aspects of herself (as ethnographer and as feminist historian), shows that there are even multiple perspectives inside our own heads.

Maggie MacLure, 'Women, Writing, Theory: A Contradiction in Terms?' tackles postmodernism as a 'site of masculinist discourse' [98] (or 'a kind of boy's toy' [p.97]) which marginalizes women's writing as textually naive and theoretically impoverished. She calls for women writers not to collude with this by unnecessarily writing 'innocent' and naive descriptions. This means recognising description and experience as rhetoric (rather than taking it literally), and attempting to decode the rhetoric. Speaking of her discomfort in the way postmodernists and critical theorists have adopted (or adapted) and subverted feminist methods, she advises writers "to find more complex, less coherent, and much less 'transparent' ways of registering the voices of teachers, students and researchers, to prevent their dismissal once again as 'merely' personal" [109f], that is to interrogate texts as problematic baffling accounts. Coherence and transparency appears here as artificially created by writers to smooth over messiness. Teachers' views for example are multi-layered, change between interviews, change in discussion and debate, and may have political and personal agendas.

Annette Gough in 'Blurring Boundaries: Embodying Cyborg Subjectivity and methodology' experiments with personal reflection on breast cancer, surgery, and reconstruction. She explores located or situated knowledge, personal research stories and Donna Haraway's playful cyborg methodology (1991) – by which she means, blurring the boundaries between human and machines, between public and personal, between social and body reality where social means the way her body is perceived. Her cyborg story is about herself and her prosthesis, and about the impact of this both on her lived reality and on her theorising. As an

environmental educator and scientist, she compares her embodiment theorising using the metaphor of Australian reconstruction of worked-out mines. There are many ways here of theorising about ourselves, our self image, or social image, the threats to esteem, assumptions, prejudices, aspirations and so on. She came to see her self perception, identity and subjectivity as “multiple, fragmentary, and unfinished ...”. As an environmental educator, she could after surgery better understand the aboriginal claim that mining stripped their flesh and left them to die.

Two chapters experiment with texts, the first turning a summative article into a diachronic series of interpretation levels, each dated. In ‘Re-Performing Crises of Representation’ Ian Stronach creates from a 1997 conference paper a discussion with his later self, and Heather and John Piper. The topic is the deconstruction of education foundational texts. Are such deconstructions valid or are they based on ‘specific misreadings’?. If they are valid, the foundational texts will be no longer useful and we need new founding texts on qualitative educational research. To have rejected transformational big-pictures, the researchers’ messages may become unhelpful to pragmatic politicians. Before we can get better solutions, we need better problems. We need to listen to and learn to argue from others’ point of view if we are to find our own voice. This selection of issues is itself multi-layered, with questions rather than coherent positions, coming from any one of three people over a six year period.

Noel Gough, in ‘Read Intertextually, Write and Essay, Make a Rhizome: Performing Narrative Experiments in Educational Inquiry’ discusses intertextual play, coming out of a narrative approach to theorising, viewing various aspects of knowledge as story and viewing story as one way of understanding other people. His own interest in science fiction encourages him to view education research narratives and SF narratives through the same lens. The ‘essay’ he explains as is an ‘attempt’, ‘a disciplined and methodic way of investigating a question, problem or issue.’ [157f]. Essays are “narrative experiments – to test ideas, to ‘weigh’ them up, to give me (and eventually, I hope, my colleagues) a sense of their worth”. It is a mode of inquiry, with the conclusion not known at the start. He uses the SF book *Dune* as a contribution to environmentalist debate, relating it with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. The rhetorical devices (sermons, moral exhortations and reprimands, didactic instructions, indictments, foreclosure at authors decision etc) may help us to understand and express educational issues also. Rhizomatic writing spreads through a tangle of roots in an unstructured

way. Gough exhorts us to “Make a rhizome” – and since you don’t know which stems will grow into vigorous, dynamic plants – experiment. He ends with education for democracy: we should “attend to the quality of the democracy stories [we] choose to tell or to privilege” [p.173]

This already long review has picked out some themes and topics that interested the reviewer and attempts to create a broad brush overview. However in such condensed writing every paragraph says something interesting and thought-provoking. Returning to the columned ‘introduction’ which ends the book, less bi-focal and more squint with each eye up different chimneys: Ian Stronach disables the ‘mastery’ of texts, which are never finished, never fully persuasive and sometimes absurd. Heather Piper is suspicious of false coherence, rhetorical devices like rubbishing your opponent to ‘win’ your own case, and likes understandings to tumble around a bit, multi-layered and multi-leveled and rub each others’ corners off. If she is opposed to the debate, she implicitly raises the question of how well-mannered ‘dialogue’ should be if each side is to be challenged, and at what point does belligerence turn the dialogue into competing monologues that cannot further understanding. *JBV* has a deep interest in inter-faith dialogue which is characterised by politeness and the desire not to offend. Does this promote deep two-way understanding either? This book is not for the faint hearted, but I would recommend it not as a collection of answers but as an illumination of helpful questions.

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