

Book review:

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Transforming Learning: individual and global change

SUSAN ASKEW & EILEEN CARNELL, 1998

London: Cassell (Institute of Education Series).

197 pp., ISBN 0 304 33990 3, paperback, £16.99

This book sets out to promote a 'radical new approach' to learning, the 'transformatory approach'. The authors link this to the current trend for 'global change' on the somewhat dubious view that individual change can promote change in institutions and societies. There may be a relationship between these two, but power normally prevents individual insights becoming institutionalised unless they meet some differently constructed political end. From its title onwards, this book is somewhat overoptimistic. Indeed there is no serious analysis of global change anywhere in it.

So what is 'transforming learning'? It is 'about participating in the whole experience of learning' (p. 166). It 'focuses on the learner, the learning context and the learning process'. It emphasises interrelationships between emotional, social, spiritual and cognitive aspects of learning, on learning as an activity, rather than blocks of things learnt, with individuals taking responsibility for their own learning. This argument draws explicitly from feminist research, from which it takes the notion of 'freeing the human mind through reflective activity'. It draws also on Paulo Freire, with the notion of the oppressed as learner, seeking liberation from oppression. The opposition to the view of learning that there is a canon of knowledge to be learnt (over which males have historically presided) has a respected history. Indeed, this agenda of learning as a process is currently being espoused by the Institute of Learning and Teaching. Action research, the heart of much in-service work-based research activity, has long been rooted in the notion of individual investigation of learning practice bringing about institutional change. There is a false comparison of (male) empirical research with (female) transformatory research. There are differences between the positivistic and the qualitative paradigms, but both can be empirical.

Many of us, using school-based research on qualitative and action research paradigms, recognise the tensions caused by the constant demand to measure everything. The management of change at all levels is about transformation, whether change is measured or experienced. The chapter on transforming organisation is high on rhetoric and idealism. It draws on the purple passages of a range of writers on management and organisation (and this is a decided strength), but a manager seeking to change culture and ways of working will find little practical guidance. Not to put too fine a point on it, organisations do not change themselves. Power and leadership are essential factors. Those with power set agendas – if these are not transformative, cultural change will not happen. If mechanistic appraisal systems are linked to downsizing, employees will not engage in innovative behaviour that risks failure. A learning organisation has to take account of power. Leadership may come from individuals without power – an influential nexus of grassroots improvement can emerge, but if the managers are not on board, the

results are easily subverted.

My main problem with the book is the claim to have developed a new approach, based on the over-simplistic opposition to learning which is individualistic, authoritarian, hierarchical, competitive and content-focused (p. 167). Interestingly, this sets them against the dominant model of the curriculum imposed by QCA and monitored by OFSTED. However, teaching children, rather than facts has a much longer history than this. Transforming practice through action research has had a strong influence for some decades. Nevertheless, the model of holistic learning to enthuse, motivate and inspire children and young people is one of which I and many others wholeheartedly approve. This book is a useful discussion of this position. It could be used with students involved on qualitative and action research projects for their Masters to give them an understanding of the breadth of what is meant by learning (in the fact of the crude measures popularised by league tables). It also gives a useful discussion of the management of change, showing how changes of attitude and culture are central in institutional change. But readers beware: the approach is not new and the effects are not demonstrated to be global.

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