Re-framing Education as a Thirdspace: Neonarratives of Pedagogy, Power and Transformation

by

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Declaration

The work presented in this dissertation is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. The material in this dissertation has not been submitted, either in whole or part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

Educational practices are ideologically informed, socially framed, and culturally contested. Historically, these forces have impacted upon how far and how swiftly education can respond to national and global challenges. In the 21st century the tension between Platonic and Aristotelean philosophies of education, and how those dissonant epistemologies are embodied in curriculum and pedagogy continues to inform contemporary debate about the purposes and practices of formal education. Platonic beliefs in education as a means of strengthening the state are consistent with Firstspace ideologies of testing and reporting, benchmarking and competitive practice. This is in contrast with Secondspace ideologies that emphasise education for the individual, and for cooperative communities.

This study is situated in the troubling and troubled borderland or Thirdspace between two ideologies. They are Firstspace ideologies and practices of education that seek to create a skilled but malleable workforce for a competitive economy, and Secondspace ideologies that promote individual learner autonomy for lifelong and life-wide learning and global citizenship. Transformative or critical pedagogies are described by both ideologies as pivotal: for governments they are presented as strategic to the achievement of a competitive edge in a global economy, and for postcolonial theorists they are the means for subverting epistemologies of difference and inequities of power.

The organising argument of this study, that critical pedagogy has the capacity to democratise and subvert dominant and colonising ideas and practices of education, is balanced by two supporting arguments. They are, first, that reflective, critical and transformative pedagogy belongs to a Thirdspace epistemology, whose purpose is to trouble, rather than to serve beliefs and practices of education that re-inscribe the
dominant culture. Second, that the dominant culture employs bureaucratic and hegemonic force to subvert the potential for change that results from critical and transformative praxis. Hence, the transformative educator seeks to effect change in fields that are inherently resistant to change.

A bricolage of narratives gathered over a three-year period informs this study of transformative praxis in the context of education. The data are constituted from notes, diaries, children’s and pre-service teachers’ writings and feedback, and films and interviews gathered by the researcher and participants. Narratives from an alternative play-based community primary school, undergraduate pre-service primary educators and self-as-teacher-educator constitute ‘tales from the field’, locating participants in the study as post-colonial voices.

The process of writing upon writing reveals and re-presents the views of participants as subtexts from the field. The findings of the study are presented as neonarratives, indicating shared perceptions between the school community, pre-service teachers and the researcher of dissonances between contemporary theories of education and constraints impacting upon transformative pedagogy in practice. These findings have implications for the researcher’s personal and professional practices of pedagogy as an educator of pre-service teachers as well as more broadly for government policy, the implementation of change within established systems; and for parents seeking a transformative education for their children.
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Prologue

“Priceless things have their price” Pierre Bourdieu (1986, p.47)

I plan a week’s writing retreat by a quiet beach to begin the final draft of this dissertation after 4 years of part time study. A week before that, my father dies on the other side of the world. He is in a home that is a safe space, with love and support, but he is not ‘home’. Towards the end, his carers do not understand his Scottish accent. He is lost and confused and not well enough to be moved nearer to family. Family members visit, but often John does not know us.

Tonight, after a week’s writing, thinking, coming to terms with the death of my father, and considering the importance for me of writing as a means of creating the world, I take a last walk on the beach.

The waves ebb back and forward around my ankles, and in the water I feel the ebbing and flowing of my father’s breath in his last hours. He is gone now from the fragile shell that held him in place and time, but he lives in stories and memories: in words and images for those who love him. That breath brings into focus for me the ‘seeming’ of age: I seek to connect as I walk, greeting folks on the beach. Each person reacts differently. To the young man, I am old, but not yet old enough to be non-predatory, so he is a little suspicious at my friendliness. To the older and frailer woman and man I seem still young and vigorous, yet I see myself in their shell now, aware already of the weight of time, where I was once light and strong. I smile and rejoice seeing a young woman, an earlier self, dancing into the surf with her children, joyously unaware of the limits time sets on energy and beauty.
I walk alone at sunset. The water rises, and falls. My breath rises, and falls. I will take something with me from this place, a remembrance of my father and for my time here. At first I choose a perfect spiral with its neat symbolism, but then, fearing its perfection is too simple I notice also that the shell is heavy. It has life inside.

So, I resolve to accept whatever arrives in my path. I walk slowly, considering the worn and the broken, the uneven, the discordant, distorted, discoloured, unexpected, and the strange. A wave drags a disc-shaped biscuit of off-white to rest against my foot. Small, chunky and mottled, the bone-coloured coral has carved recesses. The holes hint at a skeleton of coral. I rinse the disk in the waves and hold it in my hand, studying its roughness. Then, clasping it comfortably in my hand, I carry it back to my lodgings. I almost said ‘home’, but like my father, home will never be with me. I accept being ‘other’ and no longer seek an anchor in this world.

I will place the disc by my workspace as a totem of mortality and immortality: ‘Of his bones are coral made’. It will remind me to act bravely in the world of things.

I breathe in the preciousness of time and sweetness of salt air, and breathe out a farewell to my father who was. In my secret world his spirit will shadow me for a year until he finds rest with the ancestors. That is how it was in times long gone. That is how it is now.

I bridge the ancient and modern, standing in the space between spirals, and the ancient ways are carved in my bones.