Chapter 3.1: Reconceptualising Practitioner Knowledge

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Reconceptualising practitioner knowledge for those engaging in the education and support of others is a particularly crucial element within the context of Freirean pedagogies. It therefore fits well within the context of this book to have a section that explores how educational practitioners are engaging with Freire in their pedagogy, practice and approach to their own development and in designing and facilitating enabling space for others.

In addressing this question of practitioner knowledge for educators, I am aware that the term 'educator' may raise concerns, but it is a widely understood term and allows us to approach the challenges raised by Freire within the context of formal educational settings at all levels. Within any process of education then we have to consider the learner and the educator and how each contributes to emancipatory learning. The challenge for educators, for teachers, of engaging with their role and contribution to emancipatory learning is to be the focus for this section of the book, and it is important therefore to remind ourselves of how this might influence

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the educational practitioner as an individual who also needs to engage in learning and have the scope to influence and shape educational purposes.

As a starting point it is appropriate to acknowledge the contested, complex and dynamic nature of learning for those involved in education as teachers (Ball 2003; Avis 2010). Education systems across the globe vary widely in their structures, funding, and more importantly in how they are purposed. Increasingly, there is a sense that the social purpose for education is no longer directed towards an ethical goal of creating a capacity for critical social action, rather it is about marketisation, consumer demands, performativity, employability and employment; in other words, it is about meeting the economic purposes of governments and society. Within this environment, educational organisations are focusing on outcomes that address competitive advantage, and increasingly bureaucracy and managerialism (Ball 2008). In the face of this teachers can feel disempowered, disenfranchised and experience a sense of being victims of change and political agendas.

In countering these agendas, I suggest it is helpful to recall the prevailing view of how practitioners learn. The learning of educators is frequently framed as a professional undertaking (Evans 2008; Robson 2006; Sachs 2000) and is characterised as being discursive in its approach, contingent and embedded within the context, setting and process of practice; and it is relational: a social undertaking which is culturally framed and situated within the knowledge needs of the community of practice (Appleby and Pilkington 2014; Wenger 1998; Roxå and Mårtensson 2009). The learning of educators is complex embracing a broad span and range in the field of knowledge educators are expected to hold. Shulman (1987) considers educational practitioners as needing to be competent in seven areas of professional knowledge. In addition to this, the practitioner him/herself shifts in terms of competence between a technical, self absorbed level of competence as a novice, towards a broader, informed, unconscious competence and artistry of experience (Eisner 1985). Further, practitioner identity is regarded as being strongly aligned with and shaped by practice. A consequence of this is that whilst this makes teacher identity vulnerable in the face of a growing politicisation and marketisation of education, it means identity is also about service for the

learner and the centrality of practice. All this influences how effectively and confidently educational practitioners respond to the changing educational environment, and, consequently, how effective they are in framing their pedagogy and development within the Freirean ethos of enablement and collaborative critical learning (Freire 1970).

This is the heart of the challenge facing educators today. They have to be flexible, confident and self-directed agents in their own practice and in developing learning for others. Building on critically reflective and experience-based learning for example, Eraut (2004) proposes that practitioners should adopt a deliberative process of learning in the workplace. This deliberative process incorporates application of both reflective processes, and problem-solving activity, which he suggests can culminate in action and lead to new knowledge or understanding for practice, new or flexible behaviours and resolution of problems. Others emphasise the capability and capacity of educators to operate across boundaries and within multiple communities adapting their discourses across communities and organisational processes (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009; Wenger-Traynor et al. 2015). They emphasise too the ability of practitioners to bring to bear diverse skills and knowledge and the application of agency to practice and their own development.

This places considerable burden on the practitioner to respond unilaterally unless organisations start to create space and opportunity for reflection and learning. In Appleby and Pilkington (2014), we argue that the burden of development of educational practitioners should be a joint venture for both organisations and individuals: where organisations on the one hand recognise the value and economic worth of employees; and individuals in their turn apply critical approaches to direct development of themselves and to influence educational purposes. In this case, these purposes encompass social justice, emancipatory and critical pedagogy.

Building on work undertaken in the northwest of the UK, Appleby and Pilkington propose a model of critical professionalism, enabling structures and learning space to frame educational development of practitioners. Within this section of the book the contributions here present examples and approaches for how, in diverse changing and challenging educational contexts, practitioners are able to shape educational pedagogies to reflect the Freirean purpose of critical social justice and partner-

ship, and to enable learners and educators to move practice forward in exciting ways. This implies a shift from banking education towards agency in learning. I suggest the examples here offer an updating of Freirean pedagogy for the 21st century and for the demands of modern day communities, supporting learners to evolve as critical change agents in their own right.

Dr. Aleksander Szram talks about how his pedagogy changed after reading Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He shifted to a problem-solving approach with students from didactic one. He reflects on his move from a banking model to one that enables students to create and act with agency. He realises his role is actually quite different to the master apprentice one where students learn from a master, and in learning this, he embraces a Freirean stance where power is handed to the learners to actually learn from experience with Szram the guide on the side.

Cowman and colleagues discuss the use of community-based, service learning. This places the student within communities using action, reflection, and experiential learning, Students engage directly with communities and action. This learning is then framed in reflection and critique to take forward learning in a more powerful and transformational way. The challenge in this example is that supporting such learning, whilst powerful, required a major investment on the part of the college, teacher and students to set up relationships with communities that would allow students to contribute to community development and change through research and action. The impact on students in the early stages is significant they suggest and the value to communities transformational.

Bentley focuses on teachers' learning. She returns to her college where she established a Freirean approach to teacher education empowering teachers to change, transform and develop in their own right as teachers. In returning to review the impact of her work, Bentley finds a situation with the majority of teachers feeling frustrated and disenfranchised in the face of organisational cultures of accountability and risk aversion. However, the voices of teachers emerge in their narrative with Bentley as they are given opportunities to voice their fears and concerns and where they strive for authenticity despite the cultural constraints. In the same ways as students need to be given space and tools to develop and voice, and to influence through action, so too do the teachers. This is especially

the case because teachers learn from dialogue that is focused around practice and the needs of practice and their students, through sharing and peer exchange.

McEwan-Short and Jupp Vina in their paper address issues directly related to the subject my own interests, namely the capacity and space for academics to act as critical pedagogues, who are recognised as having a crucial, transformative role to play in the educational function of universities for social justice, critical thinkers etc. They unpack the implications of engaging in critical pedagogy suggesting it should transform classroom practice to places of dialogue and construction, transformational exchange and growth, where students are encouraged through engaging with theory and experience to become critical agents. The example lays out an interesting challenge but one that the authors suggest enables academics to move beyond the current discourse of research versus teaching and to create a more powerful identity as critical pedagogues.

Peters' article also challenges our identity as critical pedagogues, focusing on the current debate and obsession with students as partners. He questions the shallow interpretation of 'students as partners' in Freirean terms, relating it to his own personal journey of development from history specialist to educational developer, and discusses the impact it has had on his own practice. In taking this approach, Peters can explore the vision of HE where *students as partners* is related to a marketised vision of students as consumer, student as client. He argues for a developmental model where true dialogue and active participation in learning at all levels can emerge. He deconstructs for the reader the concepts implied by the Freirean and Blairite concepts of partnership and concludes that for us as educators, Freire's concept of partnership might free us to engage with students differently as learners and to escape the often passive stance being adopted by academics and teachers in education in the face of policy.

Mckeown, Jones and Sander in their chapter focus on unions and their discussion of the health service perspective reminds us that Freire's critical pedagogy is relational, dialogic, democratic and, at core, political. They identify a growth in health care research that is participatory and appreciative, using democratised approaches to research such as participatory action research, appreciative inquiry, and experience-based co-design.

They suggest we perhaps need to learn from Freire and reposition the workplace as a locus for learning and social change.

Finally, Gurjee focuses on mentoring as a research case study that has the potential to affect sustainably and profoundly upon the learning of mentor and mentee alike. Although she primarily explores the literature behind her research, she also highlights for the reader the value and emancipatory potential of mentoring, proposing that we may need to reevaluate the positioning and use of pedagogues of mentoring as a major tool.

At the start of this piece, I argued that in order to achieve the pedagogic stance and capability required, and in order to share power with the students so they can learn actively and as owners of their learning, teachers need to shift from a position of powerlessness and passivity. All too often teachers appear – or see themselves – as victims in the face of bureaucratic and political agendas that limit their space for action. For me, if we are to engage with the student-led pedagogic proposed by Freire, we too have to be agents of change, critical, informed teachers engaging in learning that transforms our practice. The examples within this section offer insights into the debate and examples of success and thought-provoking explorations of practice. Their examples make everyone an agent within educational processes. The articles challenge the banking model, recommending instead a purposive, dialogic partnership, one where teachers work with students as partners in constructing understanding, identity and knowledge. By asking questions around how we teach and engage with Freirean pedagogies, these articles challenge tutors, teachers and academics to interrogate their own role and identity within educational processes and give new sense to the relational nature of teaching. The conclusion is that teaching is never a neutral process, rather it is one where we should critically engage with context, policy and our own values, and examine our contribution and role in learning in order to fully understand and enact a Freirean approach.

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