New conservative or new radical: the case of Johan Muller

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Abstract

The work of Johan Muller has reached the stage where a coherent assessment can be made of its relevance and worth to the South African educational community. Some of his articles spanning the 1990s were collected and ordered in *Reclaiming knowledge: social theory, curriculum and education policy,* a text that theorized and critiqued the post apartheid reform process in terms of its backgrounding of explicit knowledge structures while at the same time building a theoretical model that would be useful in analysing contemporary developments in South African education. Muller located this within a broader critique of progressive education and radical social constructivism, pointing out the manner in which this project had an ironic and tragic tendency to reproduce inequality rather than address it within a South African context. It is a galling assessment for those actively attempting to redress the imbalances of South African education through principles and practices of Progressivism, the very naming of which brings forth all that is good and worthwhile in education. It is a dangerous one to make as well, for not only does it go against a powerful international community of educational academics, it also sets itself up as a critique of liberated governmental policy and practice in South Africa, all in the name of the same principle both hold so dear – social justice. Such a bold project deserves careful scrutiny and Elana Michelson offered one such attempt in her article *On trust, desire and the sacred: a response to Johan Muller's 'Reclaiming Knowledge'.* Her response, this article argues, misrepresents the project of Muller by characterising him as a conservative intellectual. This is a dangerous falsification given the realist critique it offers of recent educational reform processes and the engaged and systematic suggestions it makes for the project of social justice within South African Education.

Elana Michelson's critique of Muller's *Reclaiming knowledge* hinges on his "misrepresentation of the social constructivist school" (Michelson, 2004, p.10). Muller equates social constructivism with an extreme form of relativism that results in a "chaos of unverifiable truth claims" (*ibid*., p.11). For Michelson this is a parody of a highly sophisticated tool that has a nuanced purchase on our complex world. Most social constructivists have a "non-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world" (*ibid*., p.11). Aside from the double negative and scare quotes that refuse to engage in the

act of engaging we can only but agree and hope to find in social constructivism a practice that is even more objective and rigorous than existing western knowledge practices.[1] What social constructivism offers us, according to Michelson, is not runaway relativism but a purchase on the differently lived worlds we occupy in all their multifaceted intersections and layerings. Even more than this, social constructivism works with qualitatively different levels of accounts in a discriminating fashion, recognizing both their power and limitation. This ensures that it does not dismiss the material world under an anything goes war cry. "To the contrary: their point is that a specific material – and cultural, and physical, and discursive – world always mediates the ways in which knowledge is created, understood and used "(*ibid*., p.12).

So it is with anticipation that we read on, for with such a powerful device at Michelson's disposal, we can expect to see her demonstrate its effectiveness in use with the case of Muller. A careful, nuanced, subtle, delicate understanding of the various layerings of South African educational and academic life placed within its current context, and Muller's historical and present role within it, is what we would hope for, one that points to the weaknesses and strengths of his contribution in its various dimensions. What is her performance of social constructivist principles like in her rendering of Muller's work? How does she enact the principles of social constructivism in the case of Muller? Why does Muller use Walkerdine in the way he does, why his appropriation of Durkheim's sacred and profane forms of knowledge, why his focussing in on knowledge boundaries and the distinctions between formal and informal types of knowledge? What is the complex reality of educational life that Muller finds himself engaged within that has lead him into a continual elaboration on the nature of the boundary; why the strong attack on radical forms of social constructivism that sometimes fall to the level of polemic? What precisely is it within the modern South African educational world that Muller is consistently addressing and why is he doing it?

We find in Michelson's response a clue to what it is that drives the work of Muller. It is found, according to her, in an etymology of the word modesty. Muller often characterizes his position as modest, a use she traces back to Sir

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[1]   See Muller (2000, p.158) for a detailed discussion of this tendency of social constructivists to put these kinds of statements into scare quotes, refusing "to treat assertions as assertions". They do not treat statements as referring to states of the world without initially bracketing it in some way. Michelson provides two good examples of these in one sentance from Haraway.

Robert Boyle, son of the Earl of Cork. Michelson points out that historically "the claim of modest witness is producible only within high social ranking" (*ibid*., p.22). What are we to make of this? Muller describes his work as epistemologically modest. The historical use of this term as an epistemological descriptor in seventeenth century England points to a privileged location within the social hierarchy. Complete the link – Muller's use of modesty as an epistemological descriptor points to his high social ranking. A more classic case of the fallacy of reducing knowledge to the supposed conditions of its production would be hard to find, or so it would be if we did not find it repeated again and again in Michelson's text.[2] Never mind that his use of the term resonates slightly better with the modest proposal of Susan Haack's *Manifesto of a passionate moderate,* written at the end of the last century and located in a realist attempt to reclaim scientific knowledge. Boyle it must be, white, privileged male that he is.

For Michelson, this analysis of the conditions behind the epistemological use of the word 'modesty' helps us understand why Muller takes the position he does. His insistence on epistemological dualisms could reflect a defensiveness that South African academics feel that is a result of the historical moment they currently find themselves in. For it is not only Muller who is guilty of explicit dualistic thinking, it is a "specifically South African phenomenon" (*ibid*., p.26). This dualist thinking is 'not present' in the international literature on RPL, and usefully extrapolating to the whole of South African academia from this small sample we can conclude that the general South African academic indulgence in dualities must have some special cause and where better to look for this than in our current social context. It is a curious way to think, making an anti-dualist point dualistically. It would seem that for Michelson there are only two types of academics in the world, those who are dualists and those who are not, and unfortunately South African academics fall into the first category. As a historically white settler society with extreme forms of inequality suddenly being shoved into the twin vortexes of a neo liberal global economy and democratic governance, this over reliance on dualistic categories is almost forgivable. But it cannot be enough to explain the peculiar insistence on the purity of knowledge domains that South African academics show. There is something laagerish about them. The revolution has moved "outside the halls of government and into the classrooms in ways they are not fully able

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2   Muller (2000, pp. 151-156) provides an extensive analysis of this fallacy in *Reclaiming Knowledge,* pp.151-156, as does Wheelahan (2005). Again we have to be grateful to Michelson for providing such an exemplary demonstration of how it works.

to control" (*ibid*., p.28) and they are thus defensively retreating into dualistic categories to gate keep. They have managed to find international dualist luminaries to utilize in this quest (scarce on the ground though they are – figures like Vygotsky, Bourdieu and Bernstein) but tend to take their politically progressive and epistemologically nuanced dualistic categories and use them for conservative ends. Here lies the nub behind Muller's fascination with boundaries. As a historically privileged White Male South African academic from Cape Town he cannot help himself, even though he has "an honoured place among the white South Africans who opposed apartheid" (*ibid.,* p.27). He has hooked into a use of dualisms that has a "long and unlovely history. They were utilized consistently within colonialist anthropology to represent Africans as the less-than-fully-human Other" (*ibid.,* p.26). Muller is guilty of the same mistake, making the cognitive worlds of black South African workers unable to envision a better world and condemning them to be excluded from envisioning the future they fought for (*ibid.,* p.27). As he contemplates with a frightened eye the spectre of unschooled workers being able to design wagons without formal training (*ibid.,* p.24), his own located historical context overwhelms him with horror and he falls into the darkness of conservatism he so manfully struggled against within himself.

These are highly sophisticated, nuanced insights into the current anxieties that typify South African academic life (*ibid.,* p.10) and a particularly astute reading of the work of Muller conducted in the most 'civil' of ways (*ibid.,* p.7). Is there anything that could be added to this powerful analysis? Possibly a couple of modest points.

The first is to explore the controversy surrounding the educational reform initiative within South African schooling in the 1990s, mentioned by Michelson in her opening paragraph and then forgotten about, as it is possibly this context that might help us to locate the theoretical intervention of Muller around how to work with boundaries, rather than etymological and colonial histories. Taylor (2000) calls it "the most radical constructivist curriculum ever attempted in the world".[3] It integrated different disciplines, their learning areas, education and training, rejected divisions between academic and applied knowledge, theory and practice, knowledge and skills, all with the intention of

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3   See also Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999, pp.118-130 for a specific analysis of Curriculum 2005 in this regard as well as Muller, 2000, pp.195-200 for an analysis of the pedagogic dangers of over integration.

creating a transferability of knowledge in real life.

> South Africa has embarked on transformational OBE. This involves the most radical form of an integrated curriculum. ... This ... implies that not only are we integrating across disciplines into learning areas but we are integrating across all eight learning areas in all educational activities. ...The outcome of this form of integration will be a profound transferability of knowledge in real life. (Department of Education, 1997c, p.29, quoted by Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999, p.118).

The dream was of a creative and empowered teacher facilitating the education of an active learner in ways that suited their own contextual conditions. This extended the political project of democratic liberation into the pedagogic field. All learners would be able to democratically learn in ways that took their own contexts seriously, allowing for differing learner paths that were all equal so long as certain specified outcomes were reached. This paradigm shift was rhetorically embraced by teachers in the most disadvantaged schools but its attempted implementation resulted in devastating consequences in an impoverished landscape with basic forms of literacy and numeracy severely suffering (see Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold, 2003, for a detailed and systematic review). It is around the issue of the viability of a radically constructivist educational reform project within South African conditions that Muller locates his work on 'boundaries'. His concern is not mainly about the value of radical forms of constructivist pedagogy in their own terms, but of how it functions within a South African context that is riven by a history of extreme deprivation and privilege (Muller, 2000, p.5).[4] To put his concern as basically as possible in the form of a question – what is the best way to teach poor kids in South Africa? To put it abstractly – how do structures of knowledge intersect with structures of social inequality within the pedagogic field? Is it best to democratize the curriculum in terms of content, pacing and assessment at the same time as radically integrating subjects under broad themes with the intention of allowing as much local freedom as possible, or is it best to explicitly make clear the content, sequencing, pacing and assessment requirements of the curriculum within strongly differentiated subject

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[4]   Muller's tight synthesis of constructivist and realist epistemologies (Muller, 2000, pp.149-153) is put together in terms of producing useful educational research for policy in South Africa, not because such a synthesis is an impressive display of neo Hegelian dialectical acumen.

boundaries.[5] Let us note how easily the first fits within a rhetoric of liberation and democracy and the second with a dictatorial insistence on boundaries. Appearances can be deceiving and a simple experiment taken from Holland (1981) and developed by Hoadley (2005) illustrates why.

Using cards that represented common food items she asked a variety of children to classify them into groups. She found that working class children used categories drawn from their local experiences to pattern the cards (like what daddy had for breakfast). Middle class children used organizational patterns that have a conceptual basis (like vegetables or dairy). When asked to repeat the task, she found that middle class children shifted their principle to local contextual factors whereas working class children used the same organizational principle as before. Middle class children had access to two organizing principles in terms of the food experiment, working class children one (Hoadley, 2005, pp.191-215). If we accept that one of the main functions of schooling is to introduce learners into various formal bodies of knowledge, and also accept that middle class children, because of their upbringing in the home, show an ability to work more comfortably with conceptually ordered patterns than working class learners, then one can assume that working class learners will find the conceptually organized world of school knowledge harder to master than their middle class colleagues (this disadvantage added to all the others already faced).[6]

One can go in three different directions with this recognition in terms of school knowledge. Either one can level the playing field and emphasize the local, contextual knowledge of the learner at the expense of formal knowledge structures, or one can emphasize formal knowledge structures at the expense of everyday knowledge, or one can attempt to work with the intersection between the two. All can argue that social justice inspires their project. In the first instance one flattens the verticality of school knowledge into an integrated horizontal space that allows all forms of experience their worth. In the second instance one clarifies the various verticalities of school

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[5]   Recent research by Carnoy, Gove and Marshall (2005) on academic performance in Chile, Brazil and Cuba, and by Morais, Neves and their community of researchers in Portugal points in the same direction. These countries have stronger contextual similarities to South Africa than Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA, although Muller draws insights from all with a South African eye.

[6]   See Neves and Morais (2005) for a nuanced recent account of how family pedagogic practices advantage and disadvantage learners at school.

knowledges to make the rules of access clear and explicit so that learners can both recognize what is expected of them and realize it in practice. In the third case one suggests paths to follow from the first to the second. It is the flattening of school knowledge that Muller primarily objects to and constructs his case against. This is because its rhetoric of liberation, democratization and integration actually condemns its working class learners to remain trapped within their local, everyday contexts while middle class learners (who already have access to more formal classificatory schemes and pedagogic practices) happily convert this localized, contextualized curriculum into formal and powerful knowledge structures anyway. Well trained teachers, working in well resourced schools with children reared in formal knowledge-rich environments by well educated parents function easily with an underspecified curriculum, underspecified sequencing, underspecified pacing, underspecified assessment. Poorly trained teachers working in poorly resourced schools with children reared in impoverished environments desperately need some kind of structure to hold onto, some kind of textbook that contains within it the basics of what needs to be learnt, some kind of sequence to follow that has taken into account what the further grades require, some kind of assessment that points to what is vital knowledge and how their learners are performing so that their needs can be redressed rather than continually moving them back into their already lived poor world.[7] Learners within impoverished environments need something explicit to hold onto, something that makes the rules of the educational game clear so that they can at least begin to play. It is this extreme world of options that Muller is located within, a world where one has to justify the validity of a formal assessment system with clear grading criteria, the validity of a textbook that has some content, the validity of teaching and learning that does more than sit around in groups and talk about everyday life and experiences (Muller 2004a). It is within a land located between poverty and plenty that the intervention of radical social constructivism has done more damage than good, has resulted in the reproduction of inequality rather than its alleviation, but of this world we hear little from Elana Michelson.

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[7]   See Taylor and Vinjevold (1999, chapters 5 and 6) for researched accounts of the distressing weakness of content knowledge within township schools and the deleterious effects of C2005 on learning. They point to the "overwhelming predominance of everyday knowledge, which sweeps across a bewildering mix of concepts. . . It would seem unlikely that learners will develop a systemic understanding of any of these ideas under such conditions". (Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999, p.121)

It is this context, increasingly backed up by international and local argument and research (Bernstein, 1996; Ensor, 2004; Hoadley, 2005; Harley and Wedekind, 2004; Jansen, 1997, 2001; Morais and Neves, 2001; Review Committee, 2000; Rose, 2004; Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold, 2003), that has led Muller into a focussing on the boundary conditions of knowledge, for in making these explicit he hopes to show those excluded from its gates how to enter. To describe the gate is not to be a gate keeper, it can also be the role of a radical providing an account of how to enter the gate for those who are excluded, rather than getting them to run at it hoping it will open miraculously to some chant, or that the walls will fall down if the shout is loud enough, or that they will spontaneously climb the walls with a bit of help from their friends. Muller is no Joshua standing outside the walls of Jericho. One of his luminaries is Gramsci, a modern revolutionary who understands how to enter and transform dominant and entrenched positions, of how to make the nature of knowledge boundaries explicit so that they can be successfully negotiated and crossed, who understands that the democratic project within education paradoxically works against the achievement of social justice.

> ... this new type of (progressivist) school appears and is advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallise them in Chinese complexities (Gramsci, 1986, quoted by Muller, 2002, p.8).

If knowledge is power then it is incumbent on specific South African intellectuals to explain exactly how one gains access to its realm, and, once within its walls, clarify what its rules are and provide a map of its various regions, chasms, mountains and borders, especially to those who have historically not been allowed within its land and who struggle to recognize its properties. Social justice sits at the heart of this endeavour for it attempts to provide those without clear recognition and realization rules of what the various knowledge forms are, an explicit map of its terrain. To be overtly plain: Muller's diagnosis attempts to touch our current pain with the insight that we have blurred what the boundaries of knowledge are and this has caused unnecessary confusion throughout the pedagogic field. His cure is to reclaim what knowledge is by making its rules of access and functioning explicit so that those who have historically struggled to negotiate these boundaries are provided with structured access. This does not mean that he ignores informal learning, as Michelson claims (Michelson, 2004, p.18), only looks within it for where its structures usefully articulate with formal learning. What he cannot do is blithely romanticize the experience of poor children and claim that the experience of poverty gives them a "privileged standpoint from which to

understand the economic system and its effects" (*ibid.,* p.19). To recognize poverty does not mean one has an understanding of economic systems. This is romanticism of the cruelest kind. It is also an example of what Bourdieu (1998) calls the scholastic fallacy, where one places a scholar within the agent under exploration. Bourdieu labels it as the most serious epistemological mistake in the human sciences. Muller documents the fallacy (Muller, 2000, p.156) as one common among constructivists and Michelson is happy to oblige with an excellent demonstration of the correctness of his characterization. One has to wonder at this point whether she is critiquing his position or setting out to embody each of his criticisms as her paper progresses. Certainly her enactment of social constructivism tends to support Muller's characterization more than her own, providing a useful exemplar for students of education of how a performative contradiction actually works.

Although forms of knowledge are important to Muller he does not platonize them into a world beyond power or history. His is a specific recognition that educational access and achievement has become a vital line of empowerment within a transforming country. It is not a universal salve, but it does offer real hope to many of the disadvantaged within South Africa. It is tragic that within this historical moment of opportunity South African education is revealing performance figures that are the worst in Africa in Maths and Science. This is not about fantasy and desire or other post modern indulgences, nor is it about sophisticated debates around radical constructivism, it is about setting up basic structures that are clear and explicit so that disadvantaged learners and teachers in South Africa can recognize what is expected of them (Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold, 2003, especially chapter 5; Young, 2001). In such a framework it is criminal to remove these recognition and realization rules by obscuring boundaries of knowledge forms, by making the curriculum content vague and under specified, by allowing the illusion of freedom to pursue one's own path through the world of knowledge when all that faces one is an empty desert where there are very few textbooks, skilled teachers, functioning schools and organized departments.[8] Muller is attempting to make clear and explicit what education is in its own terms.

What Michelson misses is the enormous opportunity lost in the initial version of the reform process that is tragic in its proportions, and that underlying this reform process was a radical form of social constructivism that was used to

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[8]   See Dempster's book review of *The Architect and the Scaffold* in this issue of JoE for an
       example of how this manifests in Biology.

make a symbolic political statement without concerning itself with the educational readiness of the system to implement its astonishingly complex architecture (Jansen, 2001). Of this Michelson makes no mention, preferring to plunge onwards into a Lacanian analysis of desire.[9] The peculiarly South African emphasis on dualisms might have less to do with a racist past and a conservative programme of gate-keeping and more to do with an attempt to make knowledge structures clear and explicit so that disadvantaged learners can finally be clearly shown precisely what the ladder is they have to climb and how to do it. Rather than a rhetoric of sophisticated social constructivism, Muller is directly engaging with the complex realities of current educational trends in South Africa on the highest conceptual level and his use of theoretical positions and texts should be read with this in mind. A judicious use of a person's work is not a faithful copy, it is a demonstration of practical and theoretical intelligence held tightly together and focussed in on the current reform process within South Africa. It is a quality that the radical social constructivists responsible for the conceptualization of C2005 should have shown, rather than ramming its sophisticated cure down the throat of a desperate system that only got more ill as a result of its ministering. They should have taken their own theoretical claim to be nuanced materialists to heart and looked at what the conditions of possibility were for their elaborate dream. What radical social constructivism promised and then delivered in South Africa is very similar to what Elana Michelson promised and then delivered in terms of Muller. You cannot promulgate a theoretical position, no matter how nuanced, subtle, ingenious and delicate it is, without configuring it to the systemic demands it is being applied to. Muller has a current diagnosis of the South African case and a proposed cure that involves detailed research of what the current conditions of the system are, what reforms have been shown to be effective in similar cases, and detailed, specific suggested interventions to improve its health across its various regions, all of this configured into a critical social theory that has social justice at its heart. (Muller 2000, 2002, 2004a; Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold, 2003).

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[9]   She could have done better by exploring the Oedipal role social constructivism has played in South Africa. Oedipus was supposed to bring happiness and success with his taking the throne, but finding his land increasingly struggling under a curse for a crime that could not be solved, he tracked the murderer down, only to find that he was retracing his own footsteps and uncovering his own responsibility for the murder. For an example of the use of Lacan to understand education within South Africa, see the work of Davis, Parker and Adler (2005).

Although Muller's first priority of critique within post apartheid educational reform focuses on damage caused to social justice through the democratic levelling of everyday and academic knowledge structures, his second focus is on the vital processes that can be employed to move a learner from the everyday world of local practices into the more abstract world of formal knowledge. It is within this crucial pedagogic space between the profane and the sacred that Michelson locates the best part of her critique of Muller and it hinges on their respective use of the work of Walkerdine. Muller uses Walkerdine to illustrate how constructivism can be correctly employed within South African conditions to move from the everyday to the abstract. As his argument is misrepresented by Michelson, allow me a brief restatement. Muller is not unsympathetic to the use of everyday knowledge structures within schooling as Michelson claims (Michelson, 2004, p.17), nor to the usefulness of pedagogic content knowledge that works this realm. His opponents are those who flatten the distinction between the boundaries of everyday and formal knowledge structures, not those who use everyday knowledge in their pedagogy. His concern is that it must be used in a discriminating fashion that does not mistake it as a formal knowledge structure. Contained within the variety of everyday experiences that exist as the rich soil of initial understanding are certain *metaphorical similarities* to specific elements of school knowledge forms. It is these that teachers must pick up on and work with, but always with an understanding of the pedagogic advantages and disadvantages of the metaphor, for sometimes the metaphor can mislead rather than initiate. The point is not to initially exclude everyday knowledge but to recognize what within it is useful for the subject under question and what is not, for they signify different things in their similarities. Once this discriminating bridge has been established, the teacher can then increasingly and rewardingly move into the precise and formal meanings the subject demands in a manner that is not threatened by an initial mismatch of metaphor to concept. Learning increasingly moves from the everyday metaphor into the specialized meanings of the various subjects, a movement that is facilitated by the correct use of everyday knowledge, not its exclusion

(Muller, 2000, pp.68-70).[10]

With this misrepresentation of Muller's work corrected, we can go on to Michelson's complaint. For Michelson "the difference between working and middle class children's education in mathematics must be seen, not in terms of cognitive development, but of differing desires" (Michelson, 2004, p.19), illustrated by a shopping game experiment where working class children and middle class children reveal differing kinds of fantasies, one of a wealth impossibly beyond their dreams and another of mastery and control. The suggested shift in pedagogy that Michelson highlights is that we must change the fantasies of power that children have, as this is the most vital dimension of their learning as it results in "internalized forms of privilege and disadvantage that help to maintain social inequity" (*ibid*., p.19). It suggests directions for pedagogy in South Africa that are not located in what is currently most needed within its current reality. Focus in on changing the mindset of learners so that they have a positive mindset with empowering desires, and then the walls of Jericho will fall down.

It is at this point that we can most clearly see the difference between Muller and Michelson on two fronts. The first is that Muller understands that knowledge forms take on a specific reality beyond the conditions of their production, and that it is this specific reality that must not be lost in the pedagogic process, for they stand as hierarchical walls to be climbed, not as wish fulfilment fantasies to be played around with. As useful as a Lacanian analysis of learner dispositions may be at this stage of the reform process in South African education, he prefers a simpler project of explicating what the structure of everyday and formal knowledges are so that he can provide lucid ladders from the one to the other. Does this mean that he forgets about the nature of desire, the importance of social context, the power dynamics of abstraction, the hidden curriculum? Not really. Here he closely follows his mentor Gramsci.

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[10]   See also Taylor and Vinjevold (1999, chapters 5 and 6) for a similar discussion. This aspect of pedagogic content knowledge is vital to the process of effective teaching and learning. It has been a neglected aspect of research and practice within South Africa, with Adler and Reed (2002) providing a good beginning, but see Gess-Newsome and Lederman (1999) for an extended exemplary international discussion. A simple mistake often made is to think that an insistence on explicit knowledge structures means a specific type of pedagogy is tied to it. Many kinds of pedagogy can be used within an attempt to make knowledge boundaries clear.

Teachers must impart facts, therefore, but more importantly still they must impart a disciplined comportment to life. How is this done? In the old school, teachers taught Greek and Latin not because they wanted pupils to be able to speak those languages, but "because the real interest was the interior development of personality. . . to inculcate certain habits of diligence, precision, poise (even physical poise). . ." (Gramsci, 1986, p.37) – in other words, the mental and physical habits, "a second – nearly spontaneous – nature" (Gramsci, 1986, p.38); each person needs to become the famous Gramscian philosopher, the democratic civic ideal of communism, properly considered. We teach the facts of history, not because we want pupils to imbibe facts but so that they can imbibe, almost unconsciously, "a historicizing understanding of the world and of life" (Gramsci, 1986, p.39). It is the almost inadvertent learning of the important comportments – "logical, artistic, psychological experience [was] gained unawares, without a continual self-consciousness" (Gramsci, 1986, p.39) – that is the true pedagogical school task of the teacher. (Muller, 2001, p. 66)

He desires to make *explicit* what knowledge structures are and *implicit* within this is the project of social justice, the education of the body, the working with desire and personality. In empowering learners within knowledge structures that will not only give them access to greater opportunity but deepen their critical thinking and interior complexity he is furthering the cause of social justice. Michelson wishes to make *explicit* all that is hidden in this project by bringing to the foreground the desires underneath cognitive development and all the integrations and equivalences possible between the everyday world and its abstract counterpart. This is an admirable project, but it needs certain conditions in place to work as effective pedagogy. Ironically, it is these conditions that Muller is working on in substantive detail, for it is only after knowledge has been reclaimed and schools are working that all the wonderfully progressive desires of Michelson become possible. Muller's project is one of foundations, of the historical *apriori* needed within South African education at this point in its history. It is on these grounds that his work should be judged, not on his misrepresentation of social constructivism, although Michelson's performance of social constructivism has provided us with an excellent set of examples to prove his characterization for him.

So what is the foundational project of Muller in its own terms? This is difficult to catch in one paragraph but the basic lines are clear. He has concentrated both conceptually and contextually on what is needed within the field of education in South Africa. Contextually he has put together a comprehensive map of how education works from the macro to the micro levels, tracing curriculum reform from its systemic planning at national and regional levels and its implementation within the school and classroom, providing detailed accounts of how each of these work and intersect, based on recent and relevant research (Muller 2000, chapters 2, 3 and 4; Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold,

2003, chapter 5). This provides him with tools to trace the process of re-description and translation as one moves through the various levels of the pedagogic device (see also Ensor, 2004), enabling a critique of the curriculum process that works across the macro, meso and micro levels. It enables an internal understanding of how South African education works and thus stands up against those who attempt to use the educational field for their own interests without taking its internal structure into account. At the same time he is engaged on a conceptual level with how epistemological theories intersect with pedagogic practice, moving from a theoretical analysis, critique and synthesis of realist and social constructivist epistemologies to their implication within South African research, policy and practice (Muller, 2000, pp.145-164). Combined with both these projects Muller is also attempting to gain insight into the deep structures of modern knowledge forms in their own terms (Moore and Muller, 2002; Muller, 2004b) and how these articulate with varying structures of consciousness partly produced by the extremes of wealth and poverty, with the intention of being able to articulate in a nuanced way how different knowledge forms intersect with the pedagogic consequences of social inequality. At the heart of this lies the question of what knowledge is and how to correctly work with it pedagogically. All of this is done with the intention of facilitating the entry of those most disadvantaged by their social background into knowledge forms that can facilitate their collective empowerment. Combined these form one of the most coherent and ambitious projects in South African educational research at the moment.

This is not to say that Muller's project is without its difficulties, that it too carries with it unintended consequences, its own peculiar madness, its implication in current neo liberal shifts within educational governance, research, policy, reform and pedagogy[11], but that a critique of his writing should correctly locate it within the problematic beauty of South African educational life and the specific comprehensive interventions he has made within it over the last twenty years. Such a celebrating critique is still to be forthcoming but perhaps Michelson unwittingly pointed us in the right direction with her footnote on 'modesty', except it is to the realist Susan Haack we should look towards, not Robert Boyle. Muller is not so much a new conservative or a new radical as a passionate moderate living in extreme times.

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[11]   See Tickly (2003) and Christie (2005) for the directions such a critique would take.

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