Book Reviews

Morrow, W. *Learning to teach in South Africa.* Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press. 232pp.

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I might desecrate all that we believe in just in order to find out where we are

Hothouse flowers: Better days ahead, 2003

The wise man of South African education has brought out his second collection of essays. If *Chains of thought* (1989) was set against the backdrop of the Apartheid struggle (and had an appendix of quotes translated from Afrikaans), *Learning to teach in South Africa* (2007) critically engages with post Apartheid attempts to address the aftermath, providing specific diagnoses of our current smarting. Three key issues run through the collection: a critique of what Morrow calls the 'hothouse' model of teaching and learning; his suggested definition of teaching as the 'organization of systematic learning'; and a preference for a 'politics of equal dignity' within South Africa rather than a 'politics of difference'. The first detects a significant failure of the pedagogic imagination in South Africa to overcome its contextual limitations; the second points to a key conceptual move that could help teachers and teacher education out of the current impasse; and the third argues for a crucial missed step in the attempt to redress discrimination within South African education. Taken together they form a potent medicinal cocktail that hones in on specific maladies within our educational body.

The first pedagogic malady is a fixation on small classes as the ideal form of educational delivery, with all other forms taken as inferior options almost by definition. Very early on in Morrow's teaching career he was nearly destroyed by this vision. As a young English teacher at Jeppe High School he found that the picture of teaching given to him in training 'generated a suicidal project. The intense personal contact it demanded was exorbitant. . ., and the marking load took up many hours every night and most of the weekends. "My personal life shrank to nil, and although I was young and healthy, my physical condition declined alarmingly" (p.14). Such a primal inscription of pain on the body could result, if we take Freud's *Beyond the pleasure principle* as our guide, in a repetition compulsion, and so we find, with Wally Morrow

engaging again and again with this issue throughout the book. Small classes, we might ask, why would one of South Africa's key thinkers in education spend so much time critiquing an obsession with small classes. Surely the problem we have is with big classes and how to reduce them. But by the end of the third chapter of *Learning to teach* Morrow has built a convincing case as to why this obsession is unhealthy and damaging, what the root causes behind the obsession are, and what we, as a professional educational community, can do about it. It is a vital practical problem that is his focus and he never uses more of his substantial intellectual armory than is necessary to isolate, analyse and deal with the issue. Morrow's own response to the issue was not to attempt various ways of reducing big classes to small classes but rather to ask how we could teach large classes better. Again, he draws on his own particular experiences, this time as a post graduate student at London University forty years hence doing an academic diploma with 1200 other students. The course successfully dealt with its large numbers through excellent organization and a carefully constructed reading programme. As Morrow goes on to argue, they had thought through the issue in a way that combined both formal access and epistemological access to their course. They enabled large numbers to access the programme, explicit guidance to its contents, and sustained feedback. In South Africa there was, and is, a tendency to see formal access as antagonistic to epistemological access. The post Apartheid imperative to increase formal access to higher education, it was feared, would result in a reduction of epistemological access as more students meant larger classes and therefore inferior education. Morrow condemns this equation in the strongest of terms, pointing to how it has paralysed our professional intelligence (p.19), cramping us into either\or options where we should be going and\and.

It is in one of the underlying reasons behind this failure of professional intelligence that we shift to the usefulness of the second major theme in *Learning to teach* – the definition of teaching as the 'organization of systematic learning'. Morrow points to a clinging onto a material image of teaching and learning as a key factor behind the failure of the pedagogic imagination. By hooking good teaching and learning up to a material state of small classes rather than an abstract concept that transcended contextual conditions, the 'hothouse' vision of teaching cut off from its ambit all the variations that did not fit its material conditions. Rather than holding an abstract idea of teaching and asking how it adapts and fits various contextual variations, one contextual set of conditions holds sway as the only possible option. Chapters 5 and 6 elaborate both on this malady and the power of using

an abstract definition of teaching like 'organization of systematic learning' to break the blindness.

Morrow demonstrates two very different intellectual styles in approaching this key definition. Chapter 5 deals with his attempt to develop a coherent policy of teacher education by proposing a clear response to the question 'What is teacher education'. He begins boldly and simply with his own definition and then proceeds to elaborate point by point, term by term, on why he is justified in being so forward.

> Teacher education is a kind of education which enables someone to become more competent in the professional practice of organizing systematic learning, and nurtures their commitment to do so (p. 69).

Why 'practice'? Because practice is about a community of practitioners with a history and a tradition that shapes its ideals and results in specialized conceptions and articulations of excellence recognized as such by the community. This enables a separation of what is *ad hoc* in teaching from what is essential.

Why 'systematic learning'? Because modern societies have specialized forms of knowing that demand continual openness to new possibilities and this requires specialized forms of learning beyond unstructured modes of learning continuously going on in an informal way across communities. Professional teachers are engaged in organizing systematic learning, not gathering or disseminating the enormous varieties of information currently available to us. Also, by using a formal definition like 'organizing systematic learning' Morrow does not limit teacher education to the contextual set of pre-service primary and secondary schooling. Adult basic education, educare, healthcare, tertiary education, industrial training are only some of the other types of professional teaching that fit under the definition, as do our much neglected designers of learning programmes for distance education. The concrete image should find its place within a higher concept that has moved beyond extensional context into intensional abstraction. And so he continues, making 22 points on why the abstract definition holds by taking each term, unpacking its meanings, and relating it to the other terms until a sustained mosaic is achieved. R S Peters would have been proud.

But in chapter 6, 'What is teachers' work' we come across a more Socratic Wally, the kind of Socrates who saw through the pretensions of his peers and

wielded his intellect as a gadfly to critically sting them out of their bemusement. And a prick certainly is needed, given how inflated teacher workloads have become with the heavy breathing of educational transformation. What with the expectation that teachers design their own learning programmes from scratch to suit their own learners and then obsessively assess them as they continuously perform to the exacting outcomes demanded by resource rich, learner centred lessons, all done in collapsing school buildings within drug and gang infested territories riven by HIV/AIDS. The reform fell in love with impossibility, Morrow provides the disillusionment. If he had personally suffered under the whip of hothouse teaching, imagine the suffering of the current teaching cadre who took the reform demands seriously, especially as articulated by the Norms and Standards with its bloated seven roles of teaching. If a youthful Wally Morrow had met with this new vision of teaching as a young teacher we might have had no Wally at all. The basic move he makes when critiquing the Norms and Standards 'Madhouse' version of teaching roles is the same move he has made to telling effect for three decades and one we have already seen sketched out above with the hothouse model – he nails a fixation on material particulars by showing how they are transcended by an abstraction that takes what is essential and articulates it as pure essence beyond context. It is the same move he made in *Chains of Thought* with the distinction between 'schooling' and 'education', and the same move he now makes in 'What is teachers' work' with the distinction between material and formal elements of teaching. What makes this abstracting move so telling is how Morrow continuously uses it in the correct context, he performs the abstraction at the right moment, in the right register, on the right problem. And here lies his deeper similarity to Socrates, the snub nosed philosopher standing in the agora, engaging with those around him, asking how they would deal with a key problem and then getting them to move beyond answers fixated on the particular, getting them to hone in on the essence.

And this is the Wally Morrow we meet at Kenton conferences, the man who continuously puts silly questions in our faces like "what is the difference between the work a waitron does and that of a teacher", forcing us into the necessity of dealing with the essentials of education.

The third malady Morrow addresses is the uncritical embrace of multi-culturalism and difference within our educational systems. It is not that Morrow is against the celebration of difference, rather that he feels it is based on a foundation of equal dignity that works with a deep underlying sameness.

The ethics of difference is parasitic on equal dignity, it needs a neutral meeting ground where procedures are in place, rights are embedded, equality has been lived. The danger is that over emphasis on difference could rupture an already ragged social fabric. What is currently needed, given a past that pathologically emphasized difference, is a period of social stitching. Morrow is awake to the powerful wager from the politics of difference that an emphasis on equality obscures power relations and results in the perpetuation of inequality, but this must not come at the cost of moral essentialism or relativism where contextual factors are twisted into epistemic claims. Beyond who one is lies the realm of reasoning and truth, and this must be pedagogically fought for even while being sensitive to cultural difference. Both apartheid education and resistance eviscerated education, politicized it in such a way that it lost its internal coherence and form, Morrow wishes to assert the internal form of education rather than lose it in a welter of difference.

If the book review is partly a celebration of Wally Morrow, so it should be. He embodies the Kenton spirit and the *Journal of Education* is the Kenton journal. If one looks at *Chains of Thought* one sees that seven of its chapters were papers given at Kenton conferences from the late 1970s onwards. 'What is teachers' work' was presented at Kenton in 2006, and continues the Kenton tradition of located intellectual critique, only now the Morrow that speaks has the heavy experiences of Deanship and Ministerial Reviews behind him. With many these duties cause intellectual collapse, with Morrow they seem to have honed his thought into tighter, simpler formulations. Not many educational intellectuals in South Africa have brought out one good book, never-mind two. But it is in precisely this Kenton spirit that we have to turn on our fathers (as Freud so clearly saw in *Totem and Taboo*), struggle against them, ask what they have left us with to continue the struggle. And it is here that the comparison of Morrow to Socrates can help us see what he has not done and where we still have to go. The crucial educational work of ancient times was not one of the Socratic discourses where *elenchus* was forced, it was the *Republic*, a sustained positive account of what education should be. We might disagree with its vision and the principles that inform its construction, but it has given the educational world something substantial to either build upon or to resist. Socrates does not clearly provide an elaborate educational vision, he provides the archetype of what it is to live and die as a teacher who has critically seen into a world beyond concrete images. It is with Plato that levels of delicacy in elaboration of what education is, not critique of what it is not, come to the fore. And to some extent I am laying this accusation at the door of all our intellectual fathers and mothers in South African education – where is

the detailed, sustained, articulation of what education is in all its depth and complexity so that we have something to work with, something to build on, something to fight against?

Morrow does provide a definitional discussion of why he takes teacher education to be about entering into the professional practice of organizing systematic learning but I for one, was alarmed by the lack of sustained reference to the educational traditions and research dealing with this issue. There is, for example, no in-depth engagement with Shulman's conceptual and research work on teaching and teacher education. There is a carping concern that Shulman conflates teacher work and all its contingent hassles with the concept of teaching (Morrow's classic move), but if we look for substantial engagement or elaboration on Shulman in a way that systematically builds up a detailed account of what teaching is, then we struggle, apart from an endnote here and there. This would be acceptable if, in one essay, Morrow presented an overview or critique that obviously disenabled detailed elaboration, but then in another, went on to provide the requisite detail, but this never seems to happen. It could be a matter of intellectual style, a kind of cognitive habitus, where Morrow works hard at getting to the essence of things without belabouring the point, a practice of philosophy that works at the coalface with the key conceptual tools needed, nothing else. But as one reads the corpus of Morrow's work, noticeable repetitions of intellectual moves, rather than an attempt to build up a delicate, intricate, educational model presents itself. It is almost as if Morrow continuously engages in an educational project with his peers, simplifying the issues for them into key formulations that are easy to understand and refusing to write beyond them, into a space where they would have to climb hard and breathe rarified air in order to understand, into a space where Morrow was himself struggling to see further.

But these criticisms are made partly with a wry smile. To expect Morrow to be both Socrates and Plato and walk the intellectual heights like Nietzsche is to be as in love with impossibility as our educational reformers were. The critical clarity of his work is of inestimable value to the educational community of South Africa. He might leave other people to scratch under what he has put his finger on, but when these 'other people' are intellectuals of the stature of Yael Shalem, Shirley Pendlebury, Heila Lotz-Sisitka and Stephanie Allais, then the work of elaboration is in good hands. In the field of academia only a select few are allowed to point in new directions with deceptive simplicity, Wally Morrow is one. But this intellectual insight has combined with what he has taught us as a person, an intellectual, a teacher. We hold out in anticipation for

what his next contribution will be. But we can, I think, articulate where we as an intellectual community have to move towards using teacher education as an example. Firstly we need to look at how other intellectual communities are tackling the problem and learn from them in a critically constructive manner. When, for example, one compares the work in South Africa on teacher education to the final report of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) on researching teacher education (Cochran-Smith and Zeichner 2005) one cannot help but feel a little dissatisfied, if not alarmed (see Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005 for another example). There is no shortage of critique or conceptual work within the report, but its main concern was "(a) to create for the larger educational community a critical but evenhanded analysis of the empirical evidence related to practices and policies in pre-service teacher education in the United States and (b) to recommend research directions that are most promising for what the educational community needs to know in order to prepare strong teachers for the nation's school children" (p.49). We need an educational research organization in South Africa that has South African educational research as its focus (oxymoronic as that is), one that is not driven by old apartheid divisions or institutional logics, one that works like, and has links with, AERA in America or AARE in Australia and EERA in Europe. Secondly, and here I am addressing those of us engaged in the project of thinking about what education is and should be, we need to work on our levels of delicacy in educational thinking. Key distinctions are not enough, we need to develop languages that track the field of education in all its complex variety and strata. To juxtapose schooling to education, material conditions to formal conditions, a politics of difference to a politics of equal dignity, cannot carry the day anymore. Our educational lexis is poorly developed and systematized, that is why someone like Spady could arrive and dominate educational reform, and why someone like Bernstein could arrive and dominate educational theorizing in South Africa. We still suffer from what Apartheid forced on us, the comfort in having a clear enemy to fight with simple tools. A far more subtle, difficult and positive intellectual future awaits us.

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