Editorial

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What is the relationship of description to critique? How do issues of social justice intersect with pragmatic depictions of lived reality? My own university education taught me the power of critique over and above any empirical description. Reading Marx, Althusser, and Bourdieu gave me an intoxicating sense that I had somehow managed to escape from inside a lived world to a radical space outside that showed how all its secret mechanisms worked towards exploitation, dominance and the reproduction of inequality. I held up how education functioned in relation to a social justice ideal, and education fell short. With my moral compass set I was able to critically navigate the educational terrain and show how it implacably inserted you into already dominating institutions that subjected and interpellated you into logics of inequality. As I matured academically, an allergic reaction set in. How could I have been so dismissive of the actual lived realities of students and teachers; how could I have dismissed their own ability to negotiate their lived reality with contemptuous concepts like 'false consciousness'; how could I have used a generic critical analytical language rather than one specifically attuned to the inner logics of education and schooling? Self analysis revealed that critique had left a gaping hole at the centre of my professional identity as an educational scholar – it had left me convinced of my righteousness without any specific educational language of description to carry the weight. That is why the work of Bernstein came to play such a major role in my own development. He showed me how to rigorously describe educational events in their own terms, not through some other radical language taken from Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, or Deleuze (or technicist languages like Gagne, Bloom, Ausubel, Reigeluth or Merrill). If critique was to bite, it first needed to understand how education actually worked. There is something deeply conservative about such an understanding. The more steeped into the tangible logics and internal processes of education, the more infuriated I got with overarching moral positions that took some kind of a radical stand on a principle that did not get how education functioned. If critique is to sting, then it needs to drink deeply with an accurate understanding of educational nectar.

Cheryl Reeves and Sharon McAuliffe provide a precise example of how critique emerges from accurate description in their paper 'Is curricular incoherence slowing down the pace of school mathematics in South Africa?'

By analysing data on the sequencing of curricular content within schools serving low-income communities in the Cape Peninsula by *teachers who exercised their own judgement in deciding how to order mathematics content*, they show that most teachers did not present learners with a coherent programme of learning. This results in the strong suggestion that the CAPS documents (which rigorously specify both the selection and sequencing of knowledge) can be used as an instrument to empower teachers rather than as an instrument to control teachers' work. The taking away of the freedom of teachers to select and sequence knowledge is empowering. What is going on here? Is this not a form of doublethink where *War is Peace, Freedom is slavery* and *Ignorance is strength*? I don't think so, but to see why is tricky and involves making a distinction between necessary and surplus forms of power and control. The institutionalisation of education within a context of poverty where teachers have suffered from poor education and training themselves means they have limited experience with how to properly select and sequence subject content. We know a coherent curriculum with conceptual progression, connectivity and co-ordination between topics, that covers the main aspects needed to understand an area, will result in improved chances for learner understanding in comparison to an incoherent curriculum that has little progression, minimal connectivity and patchy coverage. This recognition of the inner demands of educational functionality results in a necessary imposition on the freedom of teachers to select and sequence until the teachers have the ability to do this successfully in a sustained way. This kind of necessary form of power and control is different to surplus kinds that insist, for example, that there is only one best way to order the curriculum and that this must follow a strictly hierarchical logical sequence. As Reeves and McAuliffe note (via quoting Schmidt), even the most hierarchical of subjects takes on a network structure where interconnections become a critical part of the hierarchical structure. There is no pure hierarchy, and to impose one is to enter into the realms of surplus domination. In South Africa, because of our under appreciation of the necessary logics of education, we have often confused necessary forms of power and control with surplus forms. Reeves and McAuliffe show us how to escape the noose and this alone is reason enough for publishing their paper. But they do much more than this. Apart from combining difficult theoretical labour with extensive empirical work and analysis, they also show how different educational logics hold together. Take the relationship between selection and sequencing of knowledge with pacing. Its obvious if you say it – improve curriculum coherence (i.e. selection and sequencing) and you advance the chance of pacing improving.

Reeves and McAuliffe use Posner and Strike's classic paper on sequencing published over 35 years ago as well as Schmidt's work on curriculum coherence to bolster and make more delicate Bernstein's overarching theoretical framework. Devika Naidoo uses Halliday and systemic functional linguistics to similar effect. Naidoo is concerned with developing more adequate 'tests' of the reality of classroom teaching in the interest of social justice. The basic moves go something like this. Start off with a moral imperative like Bourdieu's 'universal pedagogy' that meets the needs of all students from all backgrounds, rather than a pedagogy that privileges a specific group at the cost of others. Bernstein argued that 'invisible pedagogy' had the precise effect of privileging the already privileged at the cost of those most in need of its ameliorating effect. Invisible pedagogy hides the rules of successful acquisition and performance under the guise of increased freedom, openness and creativity, allowing those already habituated in its underlying rules to cruise with enjoyment and participation, and those who are not habituated to come up against a wall they never quite work out how to climb. What is the answer? Well, the opposite of invisible. Visible pedagogy that makes explicit what needs to be done. So far so good, but what happens when you have two lessons, both of which work with visible pedagogy, but one of which is clearly superior to the other? This is the problematic that Naidoo wrestles with. Her solution is to develop more adequate analytical 'tests' that get closer to what is really going on, and she turns to Halliday to do so. Compare these two teachers working with the impact of humans on ocean resources. Here is how they start their lessons:

Lesson A

T: Right. . .um. . . so our topic is the impact on . . . oceans. So when we are looking at impacts we are basically looking at some of the things that can affect us positively and negatively. Can you please tell us some of the things that impact the oceans positively and negatively?

What follows are the learners providing a list of effects (over fishing, littering beaches, oil spills, sewerage, dumping of toxic chemicals) that the teacher classifies under broad terms like 'ocean pollution' or 'leakage'.

Lesson B

T: Right, it says: What is the impact of humans on oceans? Okay, once again, the word impact – what does that bring to mind. . .?
L: How it influences

T: Right, how it influences. Okay, what is the difference between the word impact and exploit. . . Thomas?

What follows is an extended explicit discussion on what the differences are between 'impact' and 'exploit' in relation to 'positive' and 'negative', 'mismanagement', and 'sustainability'. Naidoo shows, using Halliday and Hasan's work on co-extensionality, how Lesson B's conceptual structure is more comprehensive and deep than Lesson A, revealing a profound epistemological dissimilarity underneath their equivalently visible pedagogic structures. The reason for this theoretical and analytical labour? It deepens the social justice project by sophisticating the tests of what would qualify as adequately dealing with the reproduction of inequality through education. Visibility is not enough, it never was enough, we need to take co-extensionality as well as visibility into account, or put differently, epistemic criteria are as important as regulative and instructional criteria. And saying this is not enough, you need rigorous tests that demonstrate the inner working of the pedagogic project with the purpose of improving its reach, otherwise epistemological access is merely a rhetorical term used by moral posers throwing words at each other.

What for Reeves and McAuliffe is a necessary pill to swallow (loss of teacher agency in the selection and sequencing of knowledge) is for Dirk Postma a crisis of agency where the ideology of performativity is stripping teachers of the 'judgements and actions that should contribute towards the selection of appropriate educational content and the achievement of valuable educational outcomes'. It is clear from the first couple of pages of this editorial that I am deeply sympathetic with Reeves and Auliffe's position, but, like them, this is specifically directed at poorly educated and trained teachers working in poverty stricken conditions, not as a general recommendation for all. Well educated and well trained teachers can certainly take a powerful agential role in the selection, sequencing and pacing of knowledge, as the Finnish case bears out with enormous weight. What makes Postma's sustained meditation on educator agency interesting is the way he locates it within recent developments in process philosophy, specifically that of Bruno Latour and heterogeneous assemblages.

There are a number of reasons why Latour is important to the education project, three of the most important being his focus on the recontextualization of knowledge; his emphasis on heterogenous assemblages; and his celebration of the dirtiest of professional careers – the politician. (Other reasons are the way he opens out Whitehead and Tarde afresh for us and the methods he

gives us to work in process via actor-network theory). The reproduction of inequality in education is not due to some mighty fissure running through the world that separates all in its path, it is a motley crew of raggedy forces combining assemblages of priests, businessmen, parents, schools, locations, equipment, houses, books, teachers, media, technology, transport all in compromise, alliance and competition within and between. There is no macro and micro in this picture, assemblages cross over this divide, working in empirical minutiae. There are no puppets caught in implacable structures – assemblages are always real and happening and sustained as a result of a balance of forces, never as a forever destined substance or logic that mysteriously has to work its inevitable path. If you want to understand what is happening, you have to get your hands dirty with all the various contradictory actants (human and non human) and hold them together in a temporary alliance that will shift as conditions change, hence Latour's celebration of the politician.

What does process philosophy do to the project of social justice within education? What happens if you find yourself in a world always changing, where every description outdates itself, where the pragmatic dominates structure, where the rhizome dominates the tree? What does a clarion call like 'education for all' mean when both 'education' and 'all' are shifting alliances holding together an emergent set of combinations always asking for something ever new, even when the request is to remain the same. On the one hand, there is a sense of opportunity and increased acting potential; on the other, it seems like an awful amount of work for minimal gain. I can understand why human actants would prefer simple tales of enemies and future victories rather than heterogeneous assemblages. If you are in a war you like to know who your enemies and friends are, what you are fighting for, and that if you win, paradise awaits (and that if you lose, paradise is merely delayed a little or intensified by 10) and most of all, you would like to know that you are actually in a war, not in the sticky tar of continual compromise. That is why, ironically, those involved in negotiating the complexity of heterogeneous assemblages, often prefer to use simple theoretical weapons and narratives as a medication device, because it allows them to focus with intent rather than sink into the energetic hum of hyperactivity. Its almost a rule – the more political you are, the more you are engaged in heterogeneous assemblage, the more simple, direct, and overarching your message.

One of the most interesting cases of the social justice imperative is found in the attempt to work out what tests can be used to recognize prior learning. I am using 'test' here in the way Boltanski (2011) uses it. It starts with a radical

unease in how formal certification of skills and knowledge do not get a handle on the real skill levels and understanding adult workers have gained though prior experience. The officially sanctioned certifications that allow people access into professions do not measure the reality of reality, forcing a critical position that attempts to revise the nature of the test itself to include within it informal prior learning. This causes conflict between dissimilar groups who have different interests and justificatory regimes. Trade Unions, with the interests of workers at heart, push hard for a strong and certified recognition of skills gained locally on the job; whereas universities have practices that tend to separate knowledge from experience to allow for a more generic set of learning experiences. What often holds together these conflicting interest groups is a broader and more amorphous set of validity claims both do agree on, like the social justice imperative within South Africa, allowing for all sorts of compromise positions that negotiate these conflicting demands within a broader vision. Alan Ralphs provides us with a careful account of the history of RPL within the South African context that illuminates how various compromise formations around RPL played out over the last two decades.

At this point I have to come clean with the hidden structuring device of this editorial. The question that frames this editorial – what is the relation between description and critique – is taken from Boltanski, and I have tried to use his work to informally structure the unfolding discussion of the papers so that you can get a taste for how he characterises the relationship. I bring your attention to his work because it enables us to see how we can hold together the real need for a strong empirical and descriptive language of description that takes the strictures of social science seriously whilst at the same time enriching the critical edge that allows our work to make a difference in the world.[1] Boltanski has seen, more clearly than anyone I have currently read, how to productively combine pragmatic process with radical critique, enabling me to fill the gaping hole left by my old tendency to critique without in depth empirical support, and my recent tendency to describe without much attendance to its critical effect.

The two final papers in JoE 52 pull the whole discussion together in two different directions. Roger Deacon, Ruksana Osman and Michelle Buchler provide a lucid overview of education publications in South Africa from 1995–2006, around 10 thousand texts in total. It provides us with an

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[1]   Thanks to Joe Muller for pointing me towards Boltanski. As usual, he has the knack of pointing to theorists who currently provide ways forward for the education debates in South Africa.

invaluable birds eye view of basic trends as well as pointing to key emerging issues, one of which is the issue of how description relates to critique. Here is how they put it and I quote in full as it pulls together much of the previous discussion with a seemingly simple recommendation.

> In order to go beyond *description and documentation* of change to advancing and implementing change, education scholarship needs to turn to larger-scale or meta-analytical studies that synthesise, draw on and connect insights from the many small scale studies in ways that suggest more effective answers to the most powerful and enduring problems in education. With a sharper focus, more small scale research could become case study research; with bigger samples, more small scale research could become large scale research; while with stronger empirical foundations, more research of all kinds could become more useful and of better quality without being any less qualitative. All of these improvements will require more funding, but this will not be sufficient: the country's best and most established researchers also need to be encouraged to work more closely together in teams and networks (both intra- and inter-institutionally) which can design viable research questions, attract resources and expertise that can sustain the research, build on what is already known, communicate the thinking and findings to other researchers and to policy-makers and practitioners, and simultaneously train co-researchers and induct postgraduate students in the processes and methodologies of investigating issues identified by and under the oversight of panels of experts.

Here we have a diagnosis of our own unhealthy habits of working with description and critique, not in terms of my own individual pathology, but of the South African educational research field as a whole. The solution is not to juxtapose description and critique as two antagonistic poles but to show how the two are deeply implicated in each other, if only we can hold together the 'heterogeneous assembly' in a way that speaks coherently to the reality of education in South Africa with the humble undertaking to always listen to the real, and once heard, to have the courage to take on the massive implications in a way that does not float off into some imaginary land but holds to the political task of building networks and alliances across personal, institutional, national and international actants so that the research we do speaks of the real to the real.

Yusef Waghid and Paul Smeyers provide a different concluding line by focusing on how an ethic of care relates to the project of social justice. Focusing on care immediately inserts one into the pragmatic rather than the universal. Accounts of care start with the material and lived and this pattern is followed by Waghid and Smeyers continually asking us to engage with the lived accounts of caring for a wolf or specific examples of experiencing discrimination. They argue it is not enough to encourage deliberation, compassionate imagining and risk taking if one desires real transformation in

democratic citizenship. Its harder than that. You need to forgive and forget, and that means doing the impossible work of forgiving the unforgiveable (forgiveness does its work in a place where restitution or rational description cannot hold the impact, where only the act of forgiving the unforgiveable will reach out over the divide). You need to protect the helpless, and that means standing up to the real work it entails. You need to do the unexpected and that means pushing yourself out of a zone of comfortable contemplation or reasonable action into a world of doing things outside your own repertoire. It is in these living actions at the edge of normal practice that we can break cycles of repression rather than merely understand and engage them. It is in dependence with others that care originates, in how we need each other, in how we are always in unequal relations that demand more than reason or equal treatment or fair shares, it demands the full recognition that we need each other to get by. Look deeply into the cloth of social justice and under its attempt to find principled ways of working with injustice you will find the lived reality of people in dependence caring or not caring for each other, and it is here that one can find a starting point that holds the descriptive and critical in an embrace rather than an analytical structure

References

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