



Practice Makes Imperfect

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 13, Issue 1, 4–5, 2016

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After the mandatory years as a school pupil, then a college and university student—some eighteen years of educational institutionalisation—I went to Christchurch Teachers' College to learn about 'lesson plans' and 'behavioural objectives'. It was a demeaning experience that focussed on a very narrow conception of practice that it raised my anti-institutional hackles and caused me to embrace a theory of anarchy as teaching practice—an embrace of a mixture of the spontaneous, a relaxed attitude and first name terms with students, and a Romantic intuitive feel for 'progress'.

As a student on placement in the early 1970s I had witnessed some disturbing episodes such as when I intervened in a discipline incident where an assistant principal completely out of control administered corporal punishment to an errant boy beating him mercilessly.

I was recruited by Peter Sharp and John Graham for Linwood High to teach senior Geography. I was hopelessly theoretical even then. The geography and social studies teachers called me 'Words' and while all in good fun I sensed a strong anti-intellectual bias that 'practice' sometimes implies.

While at Linwood I was persuaded by Rod Harries, then Deputy Principal, to join a Philosophy class at Canterbury for a BSc in Philosophy of Science. It felt like my first genuinely educative experience and it was a shot straight into the bloodstream.

As a young head of department of Geography and liberal studies at Long Bay College I came to share a collegial view with a group of teachers, like those at Linwood, who were inspired by the welfare state ideology to change education from its control and disciplinary orientation that lingered from the disciplinary society of the 1950s to one that stressed a professional departmental approach with an emphasis on in-service, new and experimental teaching and learning strategies and a commitment to make school relevant.

Then I read *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. I may have also read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* although I don't really remember. This changed everything. Postman and Weingartner's words resonated so strongly for me that I gave up teaching to pursue philosophy at Auckland:

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The institution we call 'school' is what it is because we made it that way. If it is irrelevant, as Marshall McLuhan says; if it shields children from reality, as Norbert Wiener says; if it educates for obsolescence, as John Gardner says; if it does not develop intelligence, as Jerome Bruner says; if it is based on fear, as John Holt says; if it avoids the promotion of significant learning's, as Carl Rogers says; if it induces alienation, as Paul Goodman says; if it punishes creativity and independence, as Edger Friedenberg says; if, in short, it is not doing what needs to be done, it can be changed; it must be changed. (1969, p. 13)

Reflection on practice became a mantra, especially after Schön, as a means for change and relevance. It is a form of solidarity building that promotes greater professional awareness and autonomy sometimes jointly with students, parents and members of the community. Practitioner reflection was born in the late 1960s and 1970s at the same time as 'consciousness-raising'. Under neoliberalism its power has been siphoned off as it has become bureaucratized and managerialised. What we need more than ever now is practitioner reflection on the ways in which neoliberalism has corrupted this notion—how it has appropriated it and turned it into a neoliberal technology of continuous improvement and productivity.

REFERENCES

Postman, N. & Weingartner, C. (1969). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. Harmondsworth, England/New York, NY: Penguin Books.