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PIET-HEIN VAN DE VEN AND BRENTON DOECKE

1. OPENING THEIR TEACHING UP TO SCRUTINY

This book arises out of a conversation that began in 1999, when Piet-Hein van de Ven and Brenton Doecke first met in Amsterdam at a conference of the International Association for the Improvement of Mother Tongue Education (IAIMTE). IAIMTE is a network established by Gert Rijlaarsdam (the Netherlands) and Ken Watson (Australia) in a bid to break down the parochialism that inheres within Mother Tongue (or L-1) education, and to provide a forum for conversations (in English) across linguistic boundaries.

Piet-Hein brought to his conversation with Brenton extensive experience as a researcher in another network, namely the International Mother Tongue Education Network (or IMEN), including a set of protocols for classroom observation, a strong commitment to collaborative inquiry between academic researchers and school teachers, and a rigorously theorised approach to comparative research in L-1 or Mother Tongue education (see Herrlitz, Ongstad and van de Ven, 2007). Brenton was, at the time, editor of English in Australia, the journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, and he was heavily engaged in debates about English curriculum and pedagogy vis-à-vis attempts by Australian governments to introduce standards-based reforms (Darling-Hammond, 2004, Jones, 2010). The upshot of this conversation between us – a conversation that has been resumed at various times over the intervening years, and in places as diverse as Nijmegen, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Albi and Toronto – was a research project involving Prue Gill and Bella Illesca, two English teachers based in Melbourne, and Ramon Groenendijk and Mies Pols, two Dutch teachers who worked in een school voor voortgezet onderwijs (a secondary school) near Nijmegen. The aim was to conduct a comparative study of the teaching of literature in Australia and Holland, using the protocols for classroom observation and inquiry developed by IMEN. Prue and Bella and Ramon and Mies agreed to develop accounts (or ‘cases’) of teaching literature in their respective settings. Bella acted as Prue’s ‘critical friend’ in developing the Australian case, visiting her school over a number of weeks and engaging in extensive conversations with her before and after each of the lessons she observed. Piet-Hein played a similar role with Ramon and Mies in preparing the Dutch case. When they had written their cases, the Dutch and Australian teachers then read each other’s writing, engaging in conversations that captured their sense of the similarities and differences between their pedagogies as teachers of literature.

Although they were immersed in the immediacy of their day-to-day professional lives, Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies still found time to reflect on their professional
practice as teachers of literature, opening their teaching up to scrutiny by others and interrogating the assumptions behind their pedagogies. They were prepared to inquire into what their activities could mean for their students and what the value of a 'literary' education might be within society as a whole, believing that reflection of this kind is an integral part of their role as teachers. Such professional reflection cannot be taken for granted. Recently many educational systems have implemented standards-based reforms and other measures for regulating education, including accountability mechanisms like the Program for International Student Assessment (or PISA), administered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as standardised testing developed at a national level (Australia, for example, has recently witnessed the introduction of the National Assessment Project – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] [see http://www.naplan.edu.au/]. A consequence of these reforms for teachers is that their capacities are stretched to the limit as they endeavour to meet the performance benchmarks imposed on them, while trying to maintain an ethical commitment to the welfare of the young people in their care. It is not only the sheer busy-ness that is imposed on teachers that closes off the possibility of critical inquiry, but the way standards-based reforms define a set of educational outcomes (including a certain construction of 'literacy') that people are not allowed to question. Standards-based reforms make it increasingly difficult for teachers to interrogate the meaning of what they do, both at the level of their capacity to respond to the needs of individual students (What can I do to help this particular person? Is the curriculum I provide sufficiently inclusive?) and at the level of thinking about the significance of their work as it contributes to the complex process by which a society reproduces itself through its school system (what social good does literature teaching serve?).

The policy language used to describe education increasingly reflects a market mentality, including talk of inputs and outputs, investment and efficiency, of serving ‘clients’ and ‘value-adding’, at the expense of attending to the culturally specific nature of classroom interactions and the personal needs of individual students. Teachers are required to accept pre-determined educational outcomes, such as those enshrined in PISA and other forms of standardised testing, as a given, as though the manner in which these tests construct literacy ability is universally applicable.

By raising questions about what it means to teach literature, Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies have been challenging the ‘new orthodoxy’ of performance appraisal and international comparisons which suppose that everything can be reduced to the same scale of measurement, regardless of specific national contexts (Jones, 2010, p. 14). They were mindful of the value of comparative research, both as a means of recognising the specific character of their educational traditions, and of making their habitual practices and assumptions ‘strange’ by viewing them from the standpoint of others working in a different cultural setting. The conversations and writing in which they have engaged might accordingly be read as exploring the possibility of maintaining a professionally reflexive approach to their own teaching (i.e. a ‘praxis’) at a time when enormous pressures exist to simply do what you are told without questioning.
Each stage of the research project in which these Australian and Dutch teachers have been engaged has involved complex processes of interpretation and representation of their classroom practices. The protocols developed by the International Mother Tongue Education Network (IMEN) for classroom observation presuppose that every observation of teaching and learning implies a particular standpoint or relationship between the observer and the phenomena that he or she is observing. There can be no such thing as an ‘objective’ representation of classrooms, in the sense of an impartial account that transcends the perspective and values of an observer.

For all its claims to ‘objectivity’, so-called scientific research, involving statistical data that have been generated through standardised testing, provides only a partial representation of the relationships that constitute any social setting. Such ‘objectivity’ actually has as its heart an interpretive act, involving an explanation of phenomena that has always-already been constructed as ‘data’ (Anyon, 2008). This recognition that all observations are made from a particular perspective is what gives point to the notion of comparative research as it is conceived by IMEN, and the opportunity that such research provides for participants to view their own knowledge and practice reflexively. In addition to this emphasis on the complexity of interpreting classroom interactions when investigating the situation of mother tongue educators in a range of settings, IMEN affirms the following principles as crucial for comparative research on language education (cf. van de Ven, 2001, Herrlitz & van de Ven, 2007):

- That mother-tongue education is a social construction, and a product of strong national educational traditions and complex policy environments
- That those policy environments are shaped by cultural and ideological factors in tension with globalizing economic and social trends
- That the focus of research should be on the complexities of teachers’ work, and researchers should avoid evaluative judgments about the professional accomplishment of participants.

IMEN is also committed to ensuring that comparative research on classroom teachers should be owned by the teachers who participate in its projects and that it should convey a sense of their voices. Its goal has been to set up a dialogue between researchers and classroom teachers that in turn becomes a basis for an expanding dialogue between researchers of L-1 education across a variety of national settings. At the core of this dialogue are rich accounts of classroom practices that have been jointly constructed by teachers with ‘critical friends’ who observe their classrooms and then engage in discussion and reflection about the interactions they have witnessed. This is what Prue and Bella and Ramon and Mies have achieved by sharing their accounts of their work with one another.

But the impulse behind the particular project that we initiated was never to limit the conversation to Dutch and Australian educators, rich though this conversation has undoubtedly been. Once the Dutch and Australian teachers had written the accounts of their professional practice that constitute Part Two of this book, our aim was to broaden the conversation, and to deepen the reflection by employing
strategies to bring in other viewpoints and perspectives, thus introducing other levels of interpretation. To achieve this aim we made three key editorial decisions:

- We invited Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies to write cases that were open-ended, prompting readers to reflexively consider their own frames of reference for making sense of each case, and to articulate differences between these examples of literature teaching and literature teaching in their own countries.

- We invited two leading language educators in the Netherlands and Australia to locate these cases within their national policy frameworks, reflecting on how those frameworks mediate the conversations and observations presented in each case. (See the contributions by Theo Witte and Graham Parr in Part Two)

- We invited leading academics and educators from a range of national settings to reflect on the accounts of literature teaching presented by the Dutch and Australian educators, using these accounts to reflect on the teaching of literature in their own local settings. (See the contributions by Terry Locke, Laila Aase, Anthony Petrosky, Mark Howie, Anne Turvey and John Yandell, Irene Pieper, and Mary Kooy in Part Three).

Consistent with IMEN protocols of classroom observation mentioned earlier, all contributors to this book have sought to avoid simple evaluative judgments about the so-called 'quality' of the literature teaching or learning in any one particular classroom or curriculum setting. Standards-based judgments, in any single country, assume that one can ignore the rich specificity of local educational settings and simply apply the same evaluative criteria. In such instances, a logic of sameness trivialises and tramples on diversity. What meaning can we ascribe then to PISA's international comparisons, which must downplay vast cultural, social and linguistic differences between countries and apply the same mechanical criteria in order to compare the educational performance of one country with respect to others (cf. van de Ven 2007)? The rhetoric of international comparisons can seem so reasonable, so ordinary, and yet it is the very ordinariness of teaching and learning that such comparisons are incapable of reflecting. In contrast, the spirit of international comparative inquiry that characterizes this book has sought to understand and appreciate the particularities of the different local settings of literature teaching, particularities that are mediated by language, culture, history, politics, literary texts, etc. By foregrounding such particularities, we aim to facilitate an international conversation that is far richer than that reflected in the fetish that is currently made of PISA, and the kind of panic that is fostered by politicians and media pundits in countries when their educational performance is not deemed to be as high as that of other countries.

The aim of this book has not been to capture examples of 'exemplary' or 'highly accomplished' teaching in either the Netherlands or Australia, as with the recent focus of standards-based reforms in Western nations. This would be to close down the conversation about language, about literature and about literature teaching that we are attempting to facilitate by conducting this inquiry. The aim might more properly be described as one of investigating the ordinariness of literature teaching as it is enacted from day to day in literature classrooms in different parts of the world. This has entailed making the familiar strange and teasing out assumptions
that might otherwise remain hidden or taken for granted. Invariably, the different contributors to this volume, writing from their different international settings, provide other levels of interpretation that share the comparative spirit of this project. All in their own ways attempt to understand the examples of literature teaching presented and to use these examples as a prompt to reflect on how teachers teach literature in their own countries.

The contributors to this book are each speculating about whether one can meaningfully speak about literature teaching as essentially the same activity everywhere, apart from some local variations, as though it unproblematically lends itself to comparative evaluations without any regard to the social, cultural and educational traditions that mediate what happens in classrooms around the world. By contrast, the contributors are asking: how can we understand and appreciate what happens in everyday literature classrooms within and across international settings? They are also asking whether we should always value sameness at the expense of cultural diversity. In the face of a globalised policy agenda, and standards-based reforms across the world that ignore the diverse intellectual and professional traditions of literature teaching, not to mention the richly specific nature of teaching as it is enacted in particular communities, we believe such questions well worth asking. The contributors to this volume are attempting, in the spirit of the best comparative research, to learn from each other, asking questions in order to understand, rather than measuring ‘effects’ in order to determine ‘what nation is best’.

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