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14. LITERARY PRAXIS

(A Concluding Essay)

We began our inquiry by listening to the conversations between young people in Prue's and Ramon's classrooms, as they tried to convey their impressions of the books they were reading. The writers who have contributed to this volume have likewise been struggling with words in an effort to tease out what it means to teach literature. They have been engaging with the accounts that Prue, Ramon and Mies have given of their teaching ‘in an effort to jointly construct meaning and reach understanding’ – to echo our description of the interpretive discussions in Prue’s and Ramon’s classes. This is not to say that they have felt compelled to achieve consensus about the value of literature teaching. Their essays might instead be read as initially suspending their beliefs about literature teaching in order to arrive anew at a sense of its value. And they have engaged in this inquiry in a dialogical spirit, fully conscious that the words they are using are spaces for conflicting meanings and values. In the process of writing their essays, they have each weighed up the words they have chosen, gauging whether those words name precisely what they feel about the value of literature and literature teaching. We can attest to this as their editors in the course of engaging with them as they have progressively taken their essays through several drafts in order to understand what they do as teachers of literature.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT THROUGH FACILITATING THIS CONVERSATIONAL INQUIRY?

Each of the contributors to the foregoing conversation writes from a standpoint from within the world of which they are a part (cf. Goldman, 1977, p. 6), conveying a deeply felt sense of their situation as teachers of literature and their obligations towards their students. They all view the activity of interpreting texts as crucially bound up with the need to negotiate the social relationships that comprise any classroom. We have seen that they differ with respect to the attitude of care that teachers ought to feel towards their students. Mies, for example, sees her primary role as one of sensitizing the young people in her classroom to the plight of those who are less fortunate than themselves, an emancipatory gesture that Laila Aase and Tony Petrosky feel obliged to question. Prue attempts to cultivate a sensitivity on the part of her students to the words on the page, a literary critical disposition that Laila commends, while Mark Howie questions the way she apparently privileges...
the author as the source of the meaning of the text. Ramon, on the other hand, wants to enable his students to experience the interpretive possibilities opened up by a range of literary critical frameworks — an aim that he himself begins to doubt in the face of his students' apparent resistance to the text he has chosen for study.

Yet for all these differences in their pedagogies, it seems fair to say that the contributors to this volume are united in their sense that teaching literature involves a capacity to respond to young people, to reach out and engage in a dialogue with them that taps into their worlds of experience and imagination. They all locate their decision making about curriculum and pedagogy, and the theoretical rationales they give for their practice, within their ongoing interactions with their students. Thus they continually reflect on how the young people in their classrooms are making meaning from texts and reaching judgments about the representations of life offered to them in the books they are studying.

We use the word 'praxis' to name this kind of professional engagement. This is because the word embraces a sense of continually reflecting on the ongoing activity that you find in classrooms. Everyday something is happening; everyday teachers and their students are caught up in meaning-making practices that exceed their intentions as actors within school settings (cf. Barnes, 1975/1992, p. 14); everyday they actively create the world around them. As players within this world, Prue and Ramon and Mies seek to understand what is going on, reflexively monitoring their words and actions as they interact with the young people who share the social space of the classroom with them. They seek to 'know' what they are doing, developing their understanding of the intellectual and pedagogical traditions in which they work, as well as learning from their practice and trying to grasp the full implications of what they do. As we have seen, this has involved turning the spotlight on themselves and interrogating their values and beliefs as teachers of literature, reflecting on the matches and mismatches between their intentions and what they actually achieve in their lessons (cf. Kemmis, 2005, pp. 407–408). It is hardly surprising that the essays written in response to their accounts of their work acknowledge their courage in allowing their teaching to become an object of scrutiny.

But to cast Prue, Ramon and Mies as heroes of their own tales does not really do justice to the impulse behind the writing they have done. Indeed, to the extent that such a construction might be conflated with managerial notions of individual accomplishment, as though the excellence of any teacher is not ultimately a function of the community in which he or she works, it is actually misleading. One of the paradoxes of schooling is the way that it constructs both teachers and students as individuals, as though to prevent them from recognizing the intensely intersubjective nature of what happens in schools. Everybody, to borrow from Leont’ev, is fixated on his or her individual job, instead of seeing their actions as part of the larger social activity of schooling (see Engestroem et al., 2003, p. 4). Rather than experiencing this larger activity as a collaborative venture, and sensing how their actions contribute to the renewal of culture each day, teachers and students are instead 'hailed' or 'interpellated' as individuals, to borrow from Althusser's influential account of ideology (Althusser, 2008, p. 44). They are confronted by
structures with which they cannot identify, continually subject to the surveillance of performance appraisal that requires them to show that their work as individuals meets certain pre-defined standards into which they have had no input.

It is obvious that the attitude of inquiry adopted by Prue, Ramon and Mies conflicts with the assumptions underpinning such performance appraisal in significant ways. By engaging in dialogue with educators in other settings, they are making an attempt to transcend the deeply alienating situation imposed by standards-based reforms, and enacting a deeper form of accountability to their colleagues and students than that typically reflected in performance appraisal. They are seeking to understand the meaning of their work as an expression of a larger network of social relationships, as part of the collective process by which society renews itself, and rejecting the way neo-liberal reforms construct them as isolated individuals vis-à-vis anonymous structures.

Through engaging in conversations with each other, the contributors to this volume have all been obliged to grapple with a sense of difference as much as sameness as they have sought to appreciate how they each understand and enact their identities as teachers of literature. And this sense of difference has thrown their own values and beliefs into relief, prompting them to identify the intellectual and pedagogical traditions that mediate their professional practice, as well as to scrutinise the institutional structures that shape their work as teachers of literature. There is a critical dimension to the authors' inquiry that might be described as a confrontation with 'self'. This involves acknowledging how one's self or identity is the product of one's circumstances and upbringing, of the language and culture into which one has been born, of how one's unique sensibility is actually an expression of 'an ensemble of social relations' (Marx, 1969, pp. 12-13). But the inquiry has not simply involved the identification of structures and controls and a denial of agency. This confrontation with self is also a positive vision of one's own making, and of how people collectively renew their lives each day. The inquiry has affirmed rich forms of subjectivity and social engagement as an alternative to the way neo-liberalism reduces 'individuals' to factors contributing to the growth of the 'economy'.

Even a recognition of the way teaching and learning are currently being transformed by standards-based reforms is ultimately an insight into our sociability, into the way our lives are bound up with the lives of others (cf. Smith, 2005). Such reforms mediate already-existing relationships, affecting the way teachers and their students negotiate those relationships without ever being able to efface them. Our starting point for this conversational inquiry was the world of performance appraisal embodied in PISA and other standardised testing, a world that is conceived (to borrow from Goldmann) as 'a purely external objectivity, independent of or opposed to the subject' (Goldmann, 1977, p. 43). The reflexivity enacted by Prue, Ramon and Mies and their commentators provides a counterpoint to the way such practices construct classrooms, exposing their dreadful presumption of treating these complex social spaces as though they simply lend themselves to the 'transparency' (a key word in the neo-liberal lexicon) of the classifications and measurements of an outside observer or 'expert' (see, e.g. the My School website: http://www.myschool.edu.au/). This notion of 'objectivity' within the context of the
interactions of classroom life finally makes no sense, when ‘reality’ is experienced as a constant process of negotiation between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, as a shifting set of relationships involving ‘me’ and ‘you’, requiring continual interpretation, judgment and an adjustment of expectations on the part of both teachers and their pupils, when – in short – it involves the interactions that we associate with ‘reading’.

The foregoing essays have each shown students variously taking up their teachers’ invitations to engage in dialogue about the meaning of the life they share with others as they engage with literary texts. We might think of the ‘rewards’ that Sandy Harris distributes to her students in a secondary school in Auckland (see Terry Locke’s chapter), or of Nathalie’s question about the meaning of the word ‘marooned’ (see the chapter by Anne Turvey and John Yandell) or of the ethos of the Hauptschule in Germany (see Irene Pieper’s chapter) or the participation of minority students in after-school book clubs in Toronto (see Mary Kooy’s chapter) – these and other chapters in this volume all conjure up images of specific settings and social relationships that resist being reduced to the sameness of numbers.

Classrooms may comprise all sorts of solid, material ‘things’, such as desks, chairs, laptops, books, folders, lockers and electronic whiteboards, but they cannot finally be experienced and understood as a world that is simply ‘there’. The immediacy of the everyday life in classrooms is the product of social relationships, relationships that ultimately extend beyond the physical space of a room. They extend, too, beyond the individuals who occupy that space to embrace a complex network of relationships as they are played out in society as a whole, including (to limit ourselves to the chapters that we have just mentioned) the differences between Pakeha and Maori and Pacific Islander cultures, the displacement experienced through migrating from the West Indies to East London, the struggle of Turkish people to find a place for themselves in modern Germany, and the history of visible minority students in an inner city school in Toronto. Our request to our contributors to write ‘essays’ has been driven by a recognition that we need to generate new ways of representing classroom interactions, foregrounding the complexities of those interactions as a process that eludes the generalising mentality embodied in practices such as standardised testing. This means apprehending the here-and-now within an ever-changing network of relationships that exceeds our capacity to grasp everything that is going on, making the everyday a focus for continuing inquiry. And this does not involve simply fitting everything together, as though it is a matter of synchronously locating classrooms within a larger social space that stretches beyond our immediate view. It also embraces a recognition that any representation of social phenomena is inadequate because the phenomena it seeks to capture has already ceased to exist. Another way to say this is that the present always contains within it the history of existing social relationships, collective memories that shape what happens. Even when, as individuals, we may not have lived that history, the past remains an inescapable dimension of our experience of the present. And the same might be said about the ways our hopes and expectations mediate our engagement with the here-and-now. Thus we have tried to represent teaching not just as an activity limited by the immediacy of day-to-day life in the
classroom, but as involving ongoing reflection that connects the present with the past and the future.

Where does literature teaching fit into a world of neo-liberal reforms, where everything is mapped out in advance, and education is conceived primarily as a matter of inculcating the requisite knowledge and skills for people to take their places in a 21st century economy? Policy makers do not want to grapple with the paradox that their futuristic scenarios reflect decidedly contemporary values and assumptions. Education within a neo-liberal framework can never be about realising potential that might exceed the boundaries of the present and create the conditions for a new society, for a completely different sense of how life might be lived than it is lived currently. To make a distinction that Shirley Grundy posed some years ago, the school curriculum is typically conceived as a ‘product’ rather than a ‘praxis’, as though its primary purpose is to give young people technical skills (including ‘functional’ literacy skills) to operate within a world that is conceptualised largely as one subject to manipulation and control, as distinct from one that is open to significant transformation that might accord with a vision of a truly humane society (Grundy, 1987. pp. 11-12). Drawing on Habermas, Grundy argues that this reduction of curriculum to narrowly technical interests is at the expense of acknowledging the interpretive and emancipatory dimensions of knowledge and social life (Grundy, 1987; Habermas, 1972), of a way of ‘knowing’ that posits the world as one of our own making and as therefore open to the possibility of being changed through our own actions.

Within the framework of neo-liberal reforms, debates about literature teaching are reduced to securing its place alongside other subject areas, as though curriculum, as ‘product’, embodies knowledge that exists in a realm outside the social transactions that constitute everyday life (cf. Wells, 1999). This gives rise to a very traditional understanding of literature teaching, involving a belief in the value of ‘great’ literary works that supposedly embody ‘our’ culture (this is what is happening in Australia with the introduction of a national curriculum). Is it our fate, then, as literature teachers to reproduce a division between a ‘literary’ culture and an everyday world where people employ technical skills? This appears to be the scenario reflected in Laila Aase’s anecdote about a student in a technical stream in Norway, whose parents assured him that, after leaving school, they had never found it necessary to read another short story and who therefore concurred with his view that reading stories was a complete waste of time — an anecdote that is also echoed by Irene Pieper’s account of the curriculum offered in similar educational settings in Germany. This binary between ‘literary’ culture and vocational education continues to compromise our work as literature teachers, even when (as in Prue Gill’s classroom) literature teaching is informed by post-structuralist understandings that have the potential to destabilise texts and their meanings and thus to disrupt any notion that literature is part of a fixed tradition or ‘high’ culture. The privileged conditions in which Prue is working means that she cannot escape being constructed as engaging in an elite pursuit, as several of the contributors to this volume have pointed out.

The intellectual rigour of the essays that comprise this volume is shown by the way the authors do not shy away from the contradictory character of literature
teaching and the history that has created the world in which we find ourselves. They recognise that the binaries to which we have just referred – between so-called ‘culture’ and everyday life, between an academic ‘education’ and vocational ‘training’, between those who have ‘academic’ ability and those who are more ‘practically’ oriented – reflect entrenched structures and practices that shape the experiences of young people as they make their way through school. That those who are consigned to a vocational education are typically young people from working class or other disadvantaged communities is another inescapable dimension of the way school systems in western countries are disenfranchising whole groups of students and denying recognition of their lives and local cultures. The emphasis of neo-liberal educational reforms is squarely on canonical forms of knowledge, the ‘products’ of western science and culture, rather than on facilitating classroom dialogue that is genuinely respectful of the attitudes and values that teachers and students are bringing to their exchanges with one another.

The sense of the promise of literature teaching that emerges from the foregoing conversational inquiry is all the more compelling because it is something that can only be realised when teachers reflexively engage with their own education as educators, as well as monitoring their exchanges with students, fully aware of the structures and traditions that mediate their relationships with them. Although Prue works in an elite private school, she is clearly driven by a democratic spirit which presupposes that the sensitivity towards words and meaning that she values can enhance an awareness of life’s possibilities by all students, wherever they might be located. The structures in which she works may militate against this, driving a wedge between a so-called ‘literary’ education and the functional literacy prized by the young person in Laila’s anecdote, and thus reducing the value of both. But this should not mean giving up on the prospect of transcending this binary, and believing that the literary sensibility that Prue values should be part of everyday life.

We conclude by affirming the importance of a literary praxis, conceiving a literary education as more than a body of skills and knowledge, or as a tradition of highly valued works that reflect ‘the best that has been thought and known in this world’, as Matthew Arnold famously expressed it, but as opening up the possibility of a more fully aware or ‘knowing’ engagement with everyday life (Kemmis, 2005; cf. Roberts, 2006). The glimpse of the conversations between students in Ramon’s and Prue’s classrooms with which we began this inquiry, when they self-consciously use the words available to them in an effort to understand the nature of the experiences presented to them in the texts they were reading, might also serve as the concluding moment of this book. This remains a significant image, not only of what students do with texts within classroom settings, but of our situation as educators, when we experience moments involving a recognition of the materiality of language, of the way language mediates our relationships with one another and the world around us, as against the facile notions of transparency of neoliberalism. To suppose that language provides simply a window on the world out ‘there’ is to accept reality as it is given. It is to abandon the possibility of thinking otherwise, of imagining different worlds.
But here our writing stops, even though there can be no stopping, no simple précis in a final paragraph that might sum up the understandings that we have reached. Any new understanding is always a process of reconstructing existing understandings and beliefs. This is what we hope is occurring as you read this final sentence, and reflect anew on the situations in the Dutch and Australian literature classrooms and the other classroom settings described in the foregoing exchanges as they might contrast with your own experiences.

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Piet-Hein van de Ven
Graduate School of Education
Radboud University
Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Brenton Doecke
School of Education
Faculty of Arts and Education
Deakin University, Australia