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TRANSFORMING THE RESEARCHERS WHO ARE RESEARCHING EDUCATION

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Abstract

In the spirit of wanting to ‘change the world’ and not merely to ‘interpret it’, it will be argued in this paper that researchers of education ought to be transformed into being more politically active and willing to confront miseducative practices. It is the researchers themselves – rather than their research – which need to be transformed if education – and indeed society at large – are to improve. It is contended here that we are currently witnessing a focus on a having mode compared to a being mode of existence. Consequently we give accolades to ‘corporate professors’ who have won grants, awards and produce many worthy outputs. We have come to accept a system which rewards the selfishly ambitious and overlooks those who intensely desire and have a worthwhile will and who actively work towards transforming some aspect of their environment for the better. This paper will be making the case that educational research ought to enhance this sense of care as part of the being of the researchers. Such care ought to lead to conviction and commitment which is required for courageous confrontation of policies and practices which are miseducative.

Introduction: the demise of educators, education and democracy

The theme for this year’s conference is ‘Transforming Education Research’. However, it is argued in this paper that it is the researchers themselves who ought to be transformed. Giroux (2014) observes that academics and higher education in general are under attack by conservative politicians. Since the Trilateral Commission’s report titled The Crisis of Democracy (Crozier, et al., 1975, pp. 6-7) which identified that “value-oriented intellectuals” who “assert their disgust” with corruption, materialism, monopoly capitalism and who challenge the authority and legitimacy of institutions, are considered to be a ‘threat’ to governing elites, because, according to the authors of this report, such intellectuals promote ‘excessive democracy’. Consequently Chomsky (1999, p. 61) observes that since the 1970s conservative forces have been chipping “away at the hated social contract that had been won by popular struggle.” The political right who demonstrate “a deep-seated disdain and hatred for any vestige of a critical mind” have embarked on a crusade against higher education and have now produced the “corporate university” which reflects the input/output performativity agenda developed in the business sector, and which has now resulted in “a mockery of quality scholarship” (Giroux, 2014, pp. 57, 122). It is not just university life that is being compromised but it is society in general as recognised by Nussbaum (2010, p. 2) who argues that our “nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive”.

This demise of education and democracy has been felt by some academics to be beyond their control. For example, Hil (2012, p. 227) argues that “academics, have been rendered the unpeople of the university system – their voices largely ignored, their autonomy and their freedom limited, every activity monitored”. This culture of performativity in universities has created feelings which Marginson (2002, p. 126) describes as “an educational straightjacket” which he considers is “undoubtedly disabling from a democratic viewpoint” because our “critical thinking is blinkered by economic self-interest”. Similarly Brown et al. (2011, p. 24) report that institutionally individual academics are “encouraged to pursue their self-interest”. Here we begin to appreciate that the demise of critical research and higher education has been made possible because academic researchers and educators themselves have willingly and uncritically conformed to the corporate culture of performativity due to narrow self-interest.
To address this we can look to Peters (1966) who has famously argued there are two aspects to educative learning – coming to understand and coming to care in a holistic sense. Similarly Dewey (2008a, p. 346) has identified that educators ought to have an intense desire for three things: knowledge; growth; and an “interest in the improvement of society”. He contrasts this with the so-called educators who are selfishly motivated for personal advancement and recognition, who he describes as “a sorry spectacle”. In this context we can appreciate that if researchers are learning from educational research and not just ‘performing’ research then this ought to enhance a sense of genuine care which convicts them of certain commitments to action. Therefore we need to give consideration to whether we desire and are motivated by self-interest as Marginson and Brown et al. have noted, or whether we desire a more educated population capable of confronting unjust practices and actually improving democratic life and social justice.

**From having research to being researchers**

The assault on universities and democratic life more generally by the political and corporate sectors has been unfortunately assisted by many academics themselves, who demonstrate little appreciation for critical scholarship or even democracy. This phenomenon has been noticed by Giroux (2014, pp. 17, 43) who observes that “too many academics are willing to depoliticize their work” and “have become overly comfortable with the corporatization of the university”. Similarly Bauman and Donskis (2013, p. 140) report on the preponderance of ‘corporate professors’ who have dismantled the critical and educative role of academic work and universities more generally, ‘with their own hands’, choosing to buy into the performative culture “anxiously trying to fulfil the metrics of productivity and impact, in many cases, more eagerly than the administrators”.

Significantly Bauman and Donskis (ibid, p. 140) argue that academics have drifted and have now ‘lost’ a critical understanding of the intellectual and public role that universities ought to have, being “strangely inarticulate about the purposes and worth of higher education”. This is matched by Furlong’s (2013, p. pp. 118, 166) observation that “there is a kind of passivity on behalf of universities, a marked reluctance by anyone to stand up and say what higher education is actually for” and that “intellectuals have lost confidence in their own activities and as a result there is no one available to speak for the university.” This is considered an especially serious crisis for those of us who work in education because we, more than all other academics, ought to be able to offer a clear articulation of a vision for higher education and a societal life enhanced through education. This seriousness is recognised by Furlong (ibid., p. 167) who comments,

> And in the face of this massive undermining over the past quarter of a century, how have departments and faculties of education responded? They have been silent. Very few people will stand up and say, ‘In the face of the current challenges, this is why education must be a university-based discipline; that is what the university can contribute that is distinctive, that is important’.

We are warned by Pring (2015, p. 35) to “[b]eware, therefore, those who, in the interests of research or political control, change the language of education.” Unfortunately many researchers in education have not taken heed and produce research into phenomena such as learning, teaching, curriculum, pedagogy, standards, assessment, feedback, inclusion and the like, but without embedding such work directly into education. Reflecting on “how did we [educators] lose our way?” and “how did we allow the language of education… to transform itself”, Taubman (2009, pp. 128, 135) suggests that we have been seduced to consider that we are unworthy to speak back to the kind of “evidence for success” that politicians demand and which leave our institutions bereft of education. The problem identified here is not the actual research itself but rather it is we ourselves as researchers who have become part of the problem – hence the need to re-ontologise ourselves. We need to change our being to become more
politically oriented, so that our research work can remain educative. As identified by Fallis (2007, p. 350) “educational theory is at the same time political theory, and any educational philosophy also embodies a political philosophy.” We need to transform ourselves from merely having research inputs and outputs to being researchers who are actually changing the world.

It is contended here that in order to transform ourselves as researchers, to re-ontologise ourselves from being too easily seduced to becoming the ‘corporate professors’, we need to focus on the being mode of existence rather than the having mode. In his book Being and Having, Gabriel Marcel (1949, pp. 155, 172) argues that “[e]verything really comes down to the distinction between what we have and what we are”. This theme is developed further by Eric Fromm (1976) who summarizes them as two modes of existence, where the mode of having reduces one’s self only to what one acquires and what one consumes. This might be likened to a researcher who possesses knowledge and skills, and who identifies herself through the amount of publications she has and the amount of grant money she has won and consumed. A key characteristic of this mode of having is accumulation.

The mode of being on the other hand refers to one’s orientation, involving one’s interests, will and even love. Fromm (1992, p. 1) argues that this mode of being begins with the questions “What is the goal of living? [and] What is life’s meaning for man [sic]?” His recommendation for developing our self through this mode of being – which might be understood existentially as ‘existence’ itself – is, in Kierkegaard’s words, ‘to will one thing’. By so doing all of one’s self – or one’s character – is made more independent from ‘irrational authorities’ through a heightened sense of awareness, concern and critical thinking. This mode of being fully connected with one’s world involves what Fromm (1964) refers to as genuine interest. This stands in stark contrast to the having mode based on self-interest.

Fromm’s (1956, p. 25) characteristic of ‘genuine interest’ is also represented by love and he concludes that love defines us through the direction and intensity of how we invest ourselves whole-heartedly in what we consider to be most purposeful, meaningful and significant. There is great similarly here with Dewey (2008b, p. 259) who states that,

> There are, however, in traditional teachings many reminders of the wholeness of virtue.  
> One such saying is that ‘love is the fulfilling of the law.’ For in its ethical sense, love signifies completeness of devotion to the objects [or causes] esteemed good.

Fromm (1942) recognised the significant importance of fostering our being in order to escape the commercial trap of materialism and consumerism which he argues tends to foster narcissism through an orientation to acquisition. However he recognised that this mode of being requires us to grasp our individual freedom in an authentic manner but Fromm recognised that this is something people typically fear. They would much rather conform to the mass, crowd, or herd than exercise personal freedom, and so he was attracted to Dewey’s book Freedom and Culture which addressed this same issue.

Fromm (1942, p. 3) references Dewey’s warning in this book regarding “the serious threat to democracy”, which unlike the report of the Trilateral Commission referenced earlier, Dewey considered that,

> The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions… the battlefield is also accordingly here – within ourselves and our institutions.

Dewey (2008c, p. 70) and Fromm have recognised that totalitarian regimes, which could be considered to include current corporate and neoliberal amalgamations with governments, are “committed to control of the whole life... [including our] desires”. Those who want to seduce academics to depoliticise their research try to make such a surrender attractive by offering an easier alternative without much personal effort or commitment involved. It simply requires us to ‘play the game’ through which we might be materialistically rewarded. This is in stark contrast to the genuine
interest and commitment that some extremists invest into their ideological causes. For example, when ISIS attacked Paris on the 13th November of last year, Yanis Varoufakis (2015) was asked a few days later to give his reaction to this event. He observed that “we are faced …by people who are determined to kill themselves in order to close minds and to close borders.” However, he then continued with the following challenge: “And the question for us in Europe and everywhere, do we have what it takes to commit to the ultimate sacrifices we must make to keep open minds and open borders?” This challenge is considered here to have particular importance for educators who are, through education, potentially involved in opening minds if we are committed to education rather than ‘playing the game’ out of self-interest. So one of the challenges we must reflect on is how strong and committed is our care, interest and love for making education and democracy possible and if our ultimate aims might enable us to make the ultimate sacrifices in order to actually change the world and not merely interpret it?

Making educational research educative

To make the case that there ought to be a transformation in the researchers of education, there first needs to be a recognition that educational research ought to be understood as educative and not simply ‘informative’ as Hammersley (2003) has argued, being narrowed only to the epistemological concern of technical validity of knowledge claims. In contrast, education has broader ontological and normative concerns and therefore it does not just consist in the accumulation of theoretical knowledge. The normative validity of educational research refers to the value and worthwhileness of certain practices. It pertains to what is valued and as such it necessarily makes reference to some of the ultimate aims and purposes of education (Biesta, 2010). It is argued by many (e.g. Biesta, 2010; Carr, 1995; Elliot, 1990; and Pring, 2015) that educational research is necessarily educative because of its potential for influencing and changing practices and conditions to be better. It thus has a clear moral and political dimension due to the way that it can influence how persons grow and how society functions.

When researchers either implicitly or explicitly promote some change to practices due to their research findings, they simultaneously assert that such change ought also to be considered as an improvement (Biesta, 2013). The criteria to be called upon to make a value judgment regarding what is better must necessarily reference some ultimate aims and purposes regarding education, although Biesta notes that this is largely neglected. If there is a change in educational aims there is correspondingly a change in the standards which are used to interpret and judge performance data for example. Consequently educational research cannot be ‘value free’ information or evidence-based ‘facts’.

However, some researchers do attempt to provide evidence-based research that is apparently free from moral and political concerns. For example, Hattie (2009) argues for particular teaching approaches which appear statistically to have the best chance for causing students to learn. His own ideological approach is one of efficiency which presumes an input-output model of production where the ‘inputs’ include the direct and even ‘clinical’ techniques employed by teachers, and the ‘outputs’ are the ‘successful’ performances of students. Hattie does not favour thinking but instead he encourages information to be memorized where “[m]etaphorically, the long-term memory is the archival library store where data are filed for retrieval. It is held that this system holds information in permanent storage form” (Hattie and Yates, 2014, p. 122). This assertion of Hattie’s is highly problematic because he fails to distinguish between knowledge and mere information, and he also operates with an extremely atrophied view of human persons who are apparently unaffected by the qualities of information which is ‘received’ and ‘stored’. He therefore expects educators to comply with his ‘factual’ findings, leaping from an ‘is’ to an ‘ought’ thereby denying “educational practitioners the
right not to act according to the evidence about ‘what works’ if they judge that such a line of action would be educationally undesirable” (Biesta, 2010, p. 47).

The person who learns is indeed changed in various ways, not just cognitively (as if this could be separated as a closed-system within one’s being) but also with regards to emotions, intentionality and interest. This latter aspect of interest and how it might be enhanced has been referred to by Dewey (2008d, p. 29) as “collateral learning” which he argues is “much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned” because it is the most influential aspect of a person’s being for future experiences. He understands the role of educators to be necessarily involved in moral deliberation in this respect, regarding “making a difference in the self [i.e. students], as determining what one will be, instead of merely what one will have. (Dewey, 2008b, p. 274). This is why Dewey (2008d, p. 6) was so much against the sort of learning promoted by Hattie because the mere memorization of information – even although it might be factual information – nevertheless encourages “docility, receptivity and obedience” and because this directly affects one’s personhood it is considered to have an adverse impact morally and thus is judged as being miseducative. This clearly is a problem for researchers like Hattie who attempt to produce ‘values-free’ and ‘evidence-based’ research on phenomena like ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ as if these could be separated from the inherently moral and political concerns of education. Hattie’s research is not simply informative but it is influencing many activities and changes in schooling which may or may not be valuable. As educational researchers we ought to be seriously concerned – as people – about what is happening to educational practices and be willing and able to disobey expectations which we deem are miseducative.

Researchers caring for education

While attempting to offer some criteria which can be used to differentiate education from other activities – particularly training and indoctrination, Peters (1966, pp. 30-31), in contrast to Hattie, identified that the personhood of the learner is inescapably involved when learning occurs. What makes a person ‘educated’ rather than simply being “merely well informed” is that she understands “the ‘reason why’ of things” and additionally comes “to care” for such understandings. Peters (ibid, p. 37) recognised that “a person cares about and is interested in what is valuable and worthwhile as well as being knowledgeable about and in command of such things.” In contrast to being merely an archival library on legs as understood by Hattie, Peters identified that what one learns about – whether from someone else or through one’s own research – one ought to come to care about what one understands. This is very similar to Dewey’s collateral learning which involves the person becoming more interested in a topic or issue as a consequence of learning more about it.

This brings us to appreciate that education has more in common with virtuosity than the input/output approach of outcomes-based learning. Importantly Gadamer (1999, pp. 28-30) has identified that for the Greeks “‘virtue’ [did] not consist merely in knowledge” but rather on “the way of life” and the “moral consciousness” that was required to attain eudaimonia – the good life. This is recognised by Biesta (2010; 2013) who argues that educated persons come to value and desire what ought to be desired. To use Dewey’s term, educated persons become ‘cultivated’ in their tastes, interests and desires. Indeed Pring (2004, p. 87) following on from Dewey, argues that the interests of people are “the very things which ought to be educated” [original emphasis]. Drawing on the work of Wilson (1971) who is also a scholar of Dewey, he explains that learning of an educational kind is not so much through one’s interest or from one’s interest but the learning involves “what is of interest” (Pring, ibid., p. 87). Therefore as Dewey himself argued, educators don’t need to make things interesting, sometimes by covering them in proverbial chocolate, because the things themselves ought to be appreciated as interesting due to the significance they have for life.
Similarly for researchers, our interest in the particular matters we research ought to enhance our own interest because of the significance that such matters have, not just for us, but for all those who may be influenced by our research. Researchers are particularly attuned to methodologies which are required to validate findings and to make knowledge claims. However, Dewey (1989, p. 136-7) identified that “[k]nowledge of the methods alone will not suffice” because he recognised that “there must be the desire, the will, to employ them” – not just in a technical sense but as part of a larger concern in which we ought to be “thoroughly interested”. The ‘cultivated attitudes’ which he recommended for those who conduct inquiries include open-mindedness to actively seek differing views; whole-hearted interest for some object or cause to ensure we are not distracted from giving our undivided attention; and thirdly responsibility for investing fore-sight into the possible consequences that may emerge from our research. This latter attitudinal disposition recommended by Dewey lends further support to the argument by Peters that we ought to grow in care through the things we are learning about through our research.

We can appreciate that researchers have a personal presence in their research through exercising their choice what to study and for exercising the foresight regarding its potential impact on others. As Dewey (1989, p. 139) observed, the “impersonal, abstract principles of logic” involved in our technical validity ought to be woven together in unity with our “moral qualities of character” required for establishing normative validity. This ensures that our very being is invested into our research to enable us to discriminate between educative and miseducative learning, making evaluative judgements regarding what is good and ‘better’. Unifying our intellect and moral orientation to develop the “integrated individuality” that Dewey (1988a, pp. 122-3) argued for, involves us acknowledging we don’t have a ‘private garden’ of pure self-interest to tend to, as Voltaire suggested, but “[o]ur garden is the world, in the angle at which it touches our own manner of being.” Consequently the moral deliberation which we undertake engaging with the normative validity of our work, involves our very being or self. As Dewey (2008b, p. 295) recognised our “interest defines the self. Whatever one is interested in is in so far a constituent of the self”.

**Risking ourselves in action**

The case is being made in this paper that researchers of education should consider their research as being educational rather than merely informative and especially so if the world is to be changed and improved and not merely interpreted. Such a recognition ought to uncover our interests and care which in turn reveal our character or our being. This section shall now examine the implication for this through the claim that researchers need to increase their participation for actually taking actions at various political levels – perhaps beginning within universities. It has been argued that in order to identify issues worthy of investigation, researchers ought to care about improving the world and not to just simply report on the world as it is. This may require a transformation in the being of many researchers. As was asked rhetorically earlier in this paper with reference to Varoufakis, are we willing to commit ourselves to the point of making “the ultimate sacrifice” for the ideal “to keep open minds and open borders”?

This might be demonstrated by addressing miseducative practices within education such as the new accreditation standards espoused by AITSL. Making such a commitment to say ‘no’ to such governmental interventions and taking action is a challenge which is experienced at the existential level which is recognised by Dewey (1988a, p. 135) who argued that, “Too many people, as it is, are willing to ‘let George do it’; and would willingly, too willingly, follow…Indeed, I should be willing to go so far as to say that we in this country are too submissive to what are termed authorities.”
Here we see Dewey recognise the all-too-human disposition to passively ‘let George do it’ so that one can continue being undisturbed in one’s own private world of self-interest. But this same phenomenon has been considered by Hume who in his First Principles of Government declared that,

Nothing appears more surprising to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as force is always on the side of the governed…

Interestingly he suggests that real force lies with us – the governed majority. Yet to assert ourselves to challenge hegemonic views and practices often attracts immediate criticism for causing trouble – rather than having our alternative scholarly insights welcomed. Consequently we are reminded of Nietzsche (1966, pp. 113-114) who has declared,

High and independent spirituality, the will to stand alone, even a powerful reason are experienced as dangers; everything that elevates an individual above the herd and intimidates the neighbor is henceforth called evil; and the fair, modest, submissive, conforming mentality, the mediocrity of desires attains moral designations and honors.

Readers of Nietzsche will recognise the contrast here between his slave morality and his master morality where this latter involves individuals asserting their own understandings and convictions regarding what is good and right and taking actions based on these convictions. What is important to note is that the challenge to stand alone is quite existential – it involves grappling with and confronting existential angst rather than seeking ontological security which comes through uncritical conformity and obedience.

In appreciation of this existential challenge Fromm (1942, p. 91) has identified this personal fear of freedom but recognise that we tend to be “fascinated by the growth of freedom from powers outside ourselves and are blinded to the fact of inner restraints, compulsions and fears”. He argues elsewhere (Fromm, 1981) that that this disposition to being obedient to authorities and hegemonic culture, tends to debilitate each of us from responsibly judging for ourselves and taking action. He argues that in order to transform ourselves from this inclination to be ‘good’ through obedience we ought instead be willing to be disobedient. Through extoling disobedience Fromm does not mean the ‘rebel without cause’ who is simply against something, but rather he encourages us, as does Nietzsche, to be revolutionary in our thinking and activities by being moved by a vision for something better.

In order to encourage a greater amount of committed action from educators to challenge various policies and practices, it is helpful to reflect upon the nature of our being and our ‘natural’ propensity to avoid taking political actions. It is much easier to simply pursue our own personal purposes limiting ourselves to merely report and interpret the world, and to restrict our interest to advancing our own personal careers through research outputs, awards and the winning of grants. However, we are reminded through the well-known quote by Edmund Burke that “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men [sic] to do nothing.” This ‘natural’ or ‘all-too-human’ disposition is repeated by Dewey (1988b, p. 17) where he asserts that “[n]on-resistance to evil which takes the form of paying no attention to it, is a way of promoting it.” Consequently he argues that evils are not confronted through simply reporting informatively about them but instead he understood that what is necessary is “change in objective arrangements and institutions. We must work on the environment not merely the hearts of men” (ibid., pp. 19-20). In order to bring about changes for the better, researchers cannot restrict themselves to the role of detached observers but must recognise their inescapable presence (and responsibility) in this world with its ‘evils’.

This notion of ‘evil’ is not to be reduced to demons or the rare ‘monsters’ such as Eichmann, Himmler and Stalin. Instead, as Bauman and Donskis (2013) have observed, evil tends to be perpetuated by ‘normal’ people like ourselves whose activities contribute either directly or indirectly to the everyday
occurrences of disadvantage, inequity and the like, which is achieved usually by simply failing to confront them. This passive disposition is recognised by Bauman and Donskis (ibid, pp. 52) who suggest that we are experiencing the end of Politics with a capital P and that “[w]hat we in our postmodern politics treat as public questions most often are private problems of public figures.” In a similar way it is argued here that public problems are currently being surrendered by the public to become the private problems of individual ‘authoritative’ politicians. As an example of this, in this country we currently face the (manufactured) issue of the quality of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). This clearly is a public concern because the life of public education depends upon the professionalism of our teachers. However, the public – and often many academics too – acquiesce to allow the Federal Minister of Education to treat ITE as his own personal problem to solve and who will in turn order ‘good’ academics to uncritically and obediently implement his policy.

This is in contrast to maintaining the issue of ITE in the public realm where the public at large – and especially the academics who have some expertise to offer – are able to collectively work for the common good. This is reflected in Bauman and Donskis’s (ibid, pp. 45, 50) recommendation that universities, in the Humboldtian tradition, ought to promote the “cultivation of humanity in ourselves and as an awakening in us of the potential to shape the world around us” and not merely to observe and report it, and that such change can most realistically take place when intellectuals “appear in public collectively, rather than individually”. However such collective action requires ourselves as individuals to commit to action irrespective of the intentions of others and without waiting to follow as a member of a herd under the leadership of some ‘other’ as per Nietzsche’s slave morality. Dewey (1988a, p. 135), a great advocate for democracy, also recognised the importance of existential initiative at the individual level and contended that democracy, as a way of life, “is a strenuous doctrine that demands courage of thought and belief for realisation”.

**Conclusion**

The courage for taking critical thought and political action, directly addresses our character as researchers. For research and indeed for education to be educational, it can be argued that our ontology is more important than our epistemology. That is, who we are as individual persons, what we desire, aspire towards and are committed to, is of far greater importance than the ‘things’ of knowledge claims, if the world is to be actually changed. This sort of ontology, often referred to as moral character, is summarised by Pring’s (2004, p. 38) conception of an educated person, as someone “who commits himself or herself to certain people or causes, who refuses to treat others as mere pawns in his or her game…who cares about the environment and other social and political issues” and of course is also willing to take action as a result of such focussed and even loving care for these issues.

This requires us to have existential courage as the primary requisite for embodying a genuine interest to improve society. Dewey argues that the ideal of democracy requires us to be more militant in our activities and similarly Giroux (2014, pp. 38-9) argues that “[f]ighting for democracy as an educational project means encouraging a culture of questioning” critically, and confronting practices and policies which we deem to be miseducative. Therefore as researchers of education we need to be more forceful in our commitments to our ultimate aims as we invest our care and interest – and even our love – towards the life we consider to be most worthwhile fighting to attain through both our research and our actions.

**References**


