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Theory, practice and performance in teaching: professionalism, intuition and jazz.

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Abstract

Accounts of the so-called ‘crisis in professionalism’ in teaching and teacher education in recent years have turned on the epistemological undermining of professional knowledge and the problems surrounding the synthesis of theory and practice which underpins teacher performance. It is argued that the concentration on performance in teaching and professional development is to be welcomed, provided that ‘performance’ is not defined in purely technicist or instrumental terms. In response to the trend towards evidence-informed policy and practice and mechanistic outcome-based educational effectiveness in contemporary educational debate, we conclude – drawing on the ‘teaching as artistry’ tradition and using arguments drawn from jazz music and insights gained from the jazz metaphor – that teacher professionalism can be enhanced through attention to the intuitive, improvisatory and existentialist spontaneity of teaching as artistic performance.

Introduction

Contemporary critiques of educational research in terms of its irrelevance and remoteness from practical concerns have been paralleled by developments in professional studies and the preparation of teachers at all levels of the system. Perhaps, this was to be expected since conceptions of teaching – even theoretical or metaphorical ones – are, as Delamont (1995) notes, ‘closely related to debates about appropriate styles of educational research’. If ‘teaching is an art rather than a science’, she goes on to observe, then ‘teaching should be researched by aesthetic critics rather than scientific investigators’ (p. 6).
There can be little doubt that is the scientific rather than the artistic conception of teaching which underpins current trends in educational research. As Sylva (2000) observed recently, there are ‘some who see educational research at the turn of the century as failing to achieve its mission’ (p.293). Following on from the plea by Hargreaves (1996) for teaching to become an evidence-based profession like medicine, the scientific and positivistic interpretation of the educational task has gained prominence in debates about the relationship between theory, practice and research. Supported by increasingly trenchant attacks by government officials and others (Tooley & Darby, 1998; Hillage et al., 1998) on the irrelevance and partiality of much educational research, a mainstream and standard view emerged claiming that current research ‘does not provide the answers to the questions which policy makers ask in deciding between alternative policies’ and ‘does not help professional practice’ (Pring, 2000, p.2).

Although researchers have been quick to offer cogent responses to the main criticisms – in addition to elaborating the overly-simplistic and ambiguous nature of ‘evidence–based education’ (Davies, 1999) – the positivistic conceptions of the educational task continue to hold centre stage. The Secretary of State wants educational researchers to tell him ‘what works’ (Blunkett, 2000) and this neo-pragmatism has informed the establishment of a number of new research quangos such as the ‘Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning’, the ‘Centre for the Economics of Education’ (Baty, 2000) and the all-encompassing ‘Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre’ (EPPI, 2000). If we add to this picture the factors leading to the widespread de-professionalising of teaching in recent years – prescriptive curricula, behaviouristic outcome measures and technicist models of professional studies (Elliott, 1993; Hyland, 2000; Atkinson & Claxton, 2000) – the dominance of the current simplistic, input/output ‘engineering model’ (Sylva, 2000, p.294) of research, theory and practice in contemporary education becomes comprehensible and explicable.

**The Vicissitudes of Teacher Professionalism**

Standard analyses of the notion of professionalism in public service occupations such as teaching, nursing and social work have all stressed the central importance of specialist knowledge and expertise, ethical codes and procedures concerned with training, induction and
continuing professional development (Flexner, 1915; Larson, 1977; Langford, 1978; Eraut, 1994). When commentators refer to de-professionalising trends in public service occupations in recent years they are generally concerned with the commodification of professional knowledge and the marketisation of the service culture. Referring to the rise to prominence of competence and outcome-based strategies in particular, Elliott (1993) argues that they represent a ‘production technology for commodifying professional learning for consumption’ and also operate as ‘an ideological device for eliminating value issues from the domain of professional practice and thereby subordinating them to political forms of control’ (pp.23,68).

In addition to the systematic de-skilling of teaching through instrumentalist outcome-based strategies there has been a widespread erosion of professional autonomy (Barton et.al., 1994; Whitty et.al., 1998) through the centralisation of control over all aspects of teachers’ work: curriculum (National Curriculum, literacy/numeracy hours, prescriptive G/NVQs), assessment (SATs, FEFC audits, QAA/Ofsted inspections) and conditions of service (imposed by employers in a controlled quasi-market regulated by centralist funding formalae, league tables and inspection regimes). As significant as all this for a profession which is defined mainly in terms of its ethical commitment to learners (Carr, 1994) has been the relentless transformation of public service values and virtues into a marketised, consumerist culture (Hyland, 1998).

All these trends and policy developments have resulted in what some commentators have referred to as the ‘crisis in professionalism’ (Barnett, 1997; Bottery, 1998; Furlong, 2000). In response to this crisis a number of distinctive re-professionalising strategies have emerged

1) Reflective Practice and Research: Inspired by Schon’s work (1983,1987) there have been various attempts to reconstruct professional knowledge – not as theoretical or discipline-based – but as derived and constructed from the everyday judgements and experience of practitioners (Furlong & Maynard, 1995). Linked to this reflective practice model, the ‘teacher-as-researcher’ movement inspired by Stenhouse’s (1975) pioneering work has proved to be a valuable tool in the task of re-capturing professional autonomy. The key principle here is that – faced with ever-increasing and rapidly-changing educational policy
directives – teachers should seek to maintain control over all those aspects of theory and practice which impinge on their professional lives.

In response to the increasingly top-down or centre-periphery implementation of educational policy, research by teachers on their own and their colleagues’ practices may help to re-professionalise practice in ways which benefit – not just teachers – but also students, employers and other community stakeholders. On this account, teaching and research are two sides of the same coin. As Rowland (2000) puts it:

> The ability to inquire, to engage others in one’s enquiries and to learn from them are the characteristics of the good teacher, the good researcher and the good student…Teaching, learning and research are not different activities. (p.28).

2) New Rationalism and Critical Theory: Following Hirst (1996), this strategy stresses practical rather than theoretical reason and insists that this is generated through public, professional collaboration (Hyland, 1996) and by the critical analysis of developments in all forms of knowledge. As Hirst puts it:

> We have yet to learn effectively two linked truths; that rational practice for the achievement of our good must in all areas be practically not theoretically developed but also that, if our efforts are not be constantly thwarted, they must be illuminated by all the insights fundamental theoretical critique can provide (p.172).

Hirst’s call here for the foregrounding of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* or practical wisdom in professional studies is echoed in the current policy studies analyses of the epistemological responses of higher education institutions to the forces of globalisation and the emergence of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Barnett, 2000; Symes & MacIntyre, 2000). The development of work-based learning strategies becomes central in such accounts of professional learning.

Although critical theorists such as Carr & Kemmis (1986) would endorse the practical and critical elements of new rationalism, proponents in this field would wish to point out the limitations of such accounts – in their dependence upon forms of positivism – and also the weaknesses of reflective practice in its over-reliance on the personal and subjective. There is a
clear Habermasian influence at work here which is nicely summarised by Furlong (2000) in his conclusion that:

True professionalism depends on a continued commitment to hold up knowledge, form wherever it comes, to public, collaborative scrutiny. It also depends on the commitment to create and maintain those spaces within professional life...where critical discourse can flourish. For it is only through this form of discourse that professional knowledge can be freed from its tendency to deteriorate either into subjectivism or into technicism (p.27).

This last point about the need to guard against technicism is worth emphasising since there is a tendency for all recent re-conceptualisations of teaching – not just the competence-inspired technicist ones – to overlook two key and distinctive features of human relationships: the emotional and the ethical. All the approaches to teaching examined above demonstrate, to a greater or lesser extent, an attachment to some form of Cartesian dualism which privileges mind over body and generates an overly rationalist conception of performance. Like certain theories of moral reasoning which present a picture of human conduct that concentrates on deciding and judging to the neglect of feeling and willing (Trusted, 1987), there is a tendency for the rationalist and reflective practice models of teaching to overlook the affective and conative domains.

Hargreaves (1995) expresses the position concisely and elegantly in his observation that:

While reflection is central to teacher development, the mirror of reflection does not capture all there is to see in a teacher. It tends to miss what lies deep inside teachers, what motivates them most about their work. However conscientiously it is done, the reflective glance can never quite get to the emotional heart of teaching (p.21).

Just as ‘most teacher development initiatives, even the most innovative ones, neglect the emotions of teaching’ (ibid.) so there is a similar tendency for professionalisation discourses to be ‘devoid of talk about the moral nature of teaching...as if the moral dimensions of teaching were lost, forgotten about or...simply taken for granted’ (Fenstermacher, 1990, p.132). It is well worth noting that, as Carr (1996) observes, ‘education and teaching are inherently moral enterprises’ (p.2). Thus, although reflection, analysis and the critical evaluation of practice are indispensable elements in teachers’ work, it could be argued that most problems in this
area ‘call for a moral rather than a technical response’ and that the essential and defining characteristics of teaching and learning are ‘virtues rather than skills’ (Carr, 1994, p.47).

**Artistry and Intuition in Teaching**

Tensions between all the different components of teaching - the moral and the technical, the cognitive and affective, the intellectual and conative, mind and body – can be explained in terms of the complexity of criteria which need to be satisfied for the successful completion of any performance, particularly those involving professional knowledge, judgement and expertise. Drawing on the sociological work of Jamous & Peloille (1970), Delamont (1995) examines teaching in terms of its ‘location in a two-dimensional space of indeterminacy and technicality’ (p.7). Technical skills and knowledge are the explicit, rule-governed, codified part of any job or occupation whereas ‘indeterminacy is the hidden curriculum of the job performance: all the tacit, implicit, unexamined facets of any job’ (ibid.). It is important to insist that – however much tension there is between technicality and indeterminacy in occupational performance – both should be included in all theory, practice and research on teaching. As Delamont (1995) expresses this argument:

> When educational writers say that teachers must be artists, what they actually mean is that the job of teaching has both technical and indeterminate aspects: educational research that loses sight of this is bound to fail (p.8).

Consequently, although it is tempting to conclude on this account that scientific conceptions of teaching stress the technical and artistic ones the indeterminate aspects of teaching, Delamont clearly wants us to keep both of these elements in mind. Gage (1978) – in the aptly titled book *The Scientific Basis of the Art of Teaching* – recommends a similar strategy in asserting that:

> As a practical art, teaching must be recognised as a process that calls for intuition, creativity, improvisation, and expressiveness – a process that leaves room for departures from what is implied by rules, formulas and algorithms (p.15).

In exploring teaching through the jazz metaphor, the intuitive and improvisatory elements of performance become the main focus of attention. This is not to deny, however, that the
technical elements are unimportant; it is more the case that – as was noted in the earlier sections – the positivistic and scientific models which stress these elements have had more than their fair share of attention in recent years. In redressing the balance, however, we would agree with Delamont’s point that the ‘invocation of teaching as artistry is a vague one’ and that:

those who use the metaphor rarely specify what kind of performer or creator they have in mind. Is the teacher an actor, a painter, a sculptor, a poet, a ballet dancer, a musician, a composer, a chef, a playwright, a novelist, a choreographer, a quilter, a fashion designer, or a singer? (1995, p.7)

Teachers, conceivably, could be all or any of these (particularly if we include adult educators) but the specification we wish to recommend is that of musician, and especially the jazz musician since there is so much of value to be learned from examining the relationships between rules, procedures, technique and performance in this sphere.

Jazz, Improvisation and Teaching Performance

The conceptualisation of teaching and teaching acts/performances through the use of the notion of ‘jazz’ is informed by both the explanatory power of jazz as metaphor and the use of the concept in constructions of teaching as an art which centrally involves affective, conative, aesthetic and ethical components. The significance of metaphors is revealed – not just through the central importance of forms of language used in educational debate and discourse (Scheffler, 1960) – but also because, as Anderson (1995) argues, the ‘metaphors used to describe teachers not only impact on how researchers and the public think about teachers, but on how teachers think about themselves’ (p.3; italics added). Consequently, the:

metaphors we use to describe teachers are neither trivial nor semantic. They influence the social status of teachers…They may impact on the roles that teachers assume…and on the perceptions that teachers have of themselves (ibid.).

The notion of teaching as a performance has been explored in dramatic terms (Phillips, 1995) but it is the improvisatory aspect of performance that we want to focus upon in this paper. To say that teaching and teacher education are improvised performances is to suggest that they involve skills such as flexibility, intuition, spontaneity, and creativity (Miner et al.,
1996; Weick, 1998). Just as improvisation in jazz requires familiarity with certain social norms and musical customs (Berliner, 1994), effective teaching needs the prior absorption of considerable knowledge, skills and conventions. As Crossan and Sorrenti (1997, p.165) make clear, ‘good improvisation relies on the traditional technical skills gained through practice’.

The point here is that teachers, like jazz musicians, react to circumstances on the spur of the moment, ‘When I start off, I don’t know what the punch line is going to be’ (Buster Williams cited in Berliner 1994, p. 218).

The teacher must creatively and imaginatively improvise in the face of unexpected events: late students, alienated students, failed experiments, awkward questions, strange answers and different levels of understanding within one group. Effective improvisation is crucially dependent on intuition which has been variously defined as ‘choices made without obviously formal analysis’ (Behling & Eckel, 1991, p. 47), ‘an unconscious process based on distilled experience’ (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997, p. 157), and ‘analysis frozen into habit and into the capacity for rapid response through recognition’ (Simon 1989, p.38; see also Agor, 1986; Mangham & Pye, 1991; Atkinson & Claxton, 2000). According to Crossan and Sorrenti (1997, pp. 168-9) intuition facilitates improvisation in three critical ways: (1) it assists in the identification of a range of possible creative solutions; (2) it helps in the selection of the appropriate solution from the range of possibilities; and (3) its role in the subconscious processing of ideas enables individuals to make extremely rapid responses. These, we argue, are all crucial processes and characteristics of teaching.

The development of intuitive skills may be a gradual one arising from the experiences of the teacher in his or her teaching practice placement but we suggest that intuition is - for the teacher no less than the jazz player - a key link in the web of connection between music (subject), performer (teacher) and audience (class). Excellent teaching, just like an effective jazz session, arises from an intuitive, improvisational, dynamic performance within a planned and mutually understood framework. The best teachers are not only well prepared but also practised and skilful improvisers. As teacher trainers we can certainly provide instructions on
how to write learning outcomes, draw up lesson plans, create schemes of work, analyse resource implications and manage time effectively but all this is ultimately formulaic - the equivalent of learning scales and chord sequences and playing tunes from a written score. On the account proposed, however, the art of teaching, just like the art of jazz, is revealed only in ‘live’ performance and involves the creativity of spontaneous, intuitive improvisation in the classroom.

We are suggesting that limited, formulaic, algorithmic, repertoire prescriptions of how to teach or how to play jazz are insufficient because they do not permit iterative, explorative behaviour outside of the narrow parameters they set. Both jazz and teaching require spontaneity, flair, intuition, and an individual-group rapport - a mutuality, which permits continuous re-negotiation of ‘ideas’, referred to by Barrett (1998, p.558) as ‘dynamic synchronisation’. The problem for teacher educators is how to facilitate the development of such intuitive and creative skills in student teachers. We believe that this essential learning must inevitably involve a series of different types of ‘jam session’ involving the neophyte performer in an observational dialogue with teacher trainers who are themselves demonstrably virtuoso teachers operating in a variety of roles including: mentor, master class organiser, duettist and critic. This is a complex mixture of roles but one thing is clear: just as in jazz, in order to be able to assist others to become excellent performers you must be able to perform yourself.

**Conclusion: The Teacher as Jazz Soloist**

The depiction of the teacher as jazz soloist and teacher educator as improvisation coach is an attempt to grasp some of the subtleties and complexities in the working lives of such professionals and to offer them up for inspection, comment, critique, and elaboration in a way which, we hope, resonates with the experience of teacher educators. We have concentrated on the dynamic nature of teaching as a performance, and would like to further this argument using the jazz metaphor in a plea for aesthetic judgment as a means of evaluation. Although jazz may also produce a text (recorded music), the text (a recording) is always secondary to the performance that it is meant to capture. No self-respecting jazz critic would hang a
critical evaluation solely upon the quality of the recording. Of primary importance is the performance itself. As both jazz and teaching are performed practices, performance should be the focus of evaluation, as this is where the application of critical attention is most likely to result in improvement within the field. Thus, we argue that the critical evaluation of teaching, like jazz, should be focused primarily on the (teaching) process, and only secondarily on the text or portfolio of lesson plans, and ‘ticked-off’ competencies. Excellent teachers and creative jazz musicians seek to create ‘a richness, immediacy and a graphic quality which engages the mind and imagination’ (Hartley, 1994, p.210). Bastien and Hostager’s (1988) statement that the aim of jazz is to ‘achieve a credible and aesthetically pleasing collective outcome’ (p.583) could be usefully applied to teaching.

There is an intangible quality to ‘excellent’ teaching arising from the synergistic combination of planning and improvisational performance involving subject matter, student-teacher dialogue, practical work and demonstration. We suggest that this is reminiscent of the notion of ‘swing’ in jazz, of which the New Grove Dictionary of Jazz writes: ‘swing is a quality attributed to jazz performance. Although basic to the perception and performance of jazz, swing has resisted concise definition or description’ (Kernfeld, 1994, p.1176). It could be suggested that the job of teacher educators is to encourage student teachers to observe and recognise ‘excellent’ teaching and in practice with peers and their own students’ attempt to produce swinging solos themselves. In Berliner’s (1994) account of the critical faculties of jazz musicians, entitled The Never-ending State of Getting There: Soloing Ability, Ideals and Evaluations, he notes that:

By observing critical discussions and participating in them, learners become sensitive to wide-ranging criteria appropriate for the evaluation ...and they gain a deep respect for the refined listening abilities that attune seasoned artists to every nuance and detail of improvised performance (pp.243-4).

We would suggest that the creation of such a critical dialogue between mentor and student in an environment of demonstration, rehearsal and practice is the cornerstone of effective teacher education. We are arguing for a return to the preparation of teachers through an exploration of the performance and improvisatory aspects of the art of teaching. Teacher
educators should take pride in their own performance as teachers and in their nurturing of the performance skills of their students. When the overly-prescriptive requirements of outcome-based assessment or the behaviourist collection of evidence for hundreds of teaching ‘competencies’ interfere with such performance enhancement, they can only be detrimental to the quality of teaching and professional development.

Phillips (1995) has argued that teacher educators should read Stanislavski and seek ‘a discourse where trainers and trainees are in close proximity for much of the time’ and that ‘an approach be found that puts teacher performance centre stage’ (p.107). We agree with both of these statements but in applying a jazz metaphor we have tried to extend the argument with a plea for the nurturing of essential improvisational skills. The core activities of a professional teaching studies programme should be concentrated on teaching, observation, performance coaching, evaluation and assessment. In the jazz world teachers usually continue to perform and their credibility with students and colleagues lies in their own publicly exposed skills as musicians. It is difficult to imagine great jazz teachers like Clark Terry or Wynton Marsalis training student jazz musicians in a university but never playing in the jazz venues themselves. This is an acknowledgement of the necessity of recent and relevant experience for all teacher educators and the importance of regular updating and secondment in continuing professional development. Such ‘real’ teaching - in providing a stage for student teachers to observe their mentor in action as intuitive improvisational performer - would also act as a rich source of dialogue for the subsequent learning/teaching sessions. In this way student teachers would be encouraged to find their own creative voice – a central and absolutely crucial stage in the professional lives of all performers. We can do no better than to leave the last word to Oliver Nelson (1961) who – describing this key aspect of discovery in his own career in the sleeve notes to his album *Blues and The Abstract Truth* – observed that:

> It was not until the 23rd February, 1961 that I finally had broken through and realised that I would have to be true to myself, to play and to write what I think is vital and, most of all, to find my own personality and identity. This does not mean that a musician should reject and shut things out. It means that he should learn, listen, absorb and grow but retain all the things that comprise the identity of the individual himself.
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