

## A Teacher Reborn

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It was with a heavy heart and quite a lot of disgruntlement that I enrolled on a PGCE in January 2011. Why you may ask? Quite simply, I had completed my DTLLS (the generic teaching qualification) a year before, which had been quite a chore as I did not believe it would turn me into a 'better' teacher. I had already been teaching EFL/ESOL for 13 years and in addition I was qualified as an ESOL examiner, so was rather resentful at being forced to do DTLLS. However, I had little choice because it was the latest qualification requirement in the government's drive towards '*professionalising*' teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector.

The most dispiriting fact about DTLLS was that at my college only the generic diploma was offered, without the ESOL specialisation. Consequently I knew that afterwards I would still need to do an extra year to gain the specialist qualification, which was now an essential requirement to remaining gainfully employed, and so I plodded through the DTLLS, doing the minimum that was required to pass.

#### The PGCE

After two years of toil I was faced with the prospect of another year's study but was unable to enrol for the ESOL subject specialism at another college because of work scheduling issues. This forced me look for alternatives that would suit my working hours. The Institute of Education seemed an attractive proposition because of the possibility of converting the PGCE into a Masters in the second year, if I so wished. Little did I realise this step would change my life for ever.

I thought the PGCE would be a doddle because I presumed - wrongly - that it would be quite similar to the DTLLS, covering a lot of the same ground, and I expected my DTLLS assignments would come in handy. In fact, the PGCE was far more challenging, and opened up completely new areas of specialist study. Whilst doing the PGCE I would sometimes look back at what I had written (or should that be 'cobbled' together) to pass the DTLLS, and I felt quite ashamed... but then for the DTLLS, I was only interested in passing. Bar the lesson observations, the PGCE turned out to be an enjoyable experience - I enjoyed being a student again.

#### Discovery of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

During the PGCE I came across CDA, a theory which had great impact on my thinking both as a person and as a teacher.

#### What is CDA?

*(It) "is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality." (Van Dijk, 2003).*

#### How did CDA help me?

CDA made me reflect critically about the language of texts, how they may be formed socially and politically, and I began to think more about the following:

<b>Question</b>	Always question what you know, hear, see and are told
<b>Reflection</b>	Reflect critically about the lexis of texts - how they may be socially, politically and historically formed.
<b>Reflexivity</b>	How does the reflection impact upon your beliefs, assumptions, values, etc., and what you do, how you interpret things ...
<b>Comparison</b>	Comparing texts on the same topic - similarities, differences, inclusions omissions and their implications.
<b>Language</b>	How the text is formed grammatically i.e., active or passive voice, adjectives, tense and aspect, who the audience is, what does the language presuppose and what beliefs does the writer hold?

(Table amended from University of Strathclyde website)

This framework has helped me and my students in our discussions and the study of texts. Prior to the PGCE, I had already begun to impress upon my students the importance of being critical and sceptical, and not accepting received 'wisdom' at face value but to try to discover its source, and if necessary challenging what may have been regarded as *common sense*. CDA provided me with a framework to do this.

A recent example of my use of CDA concerned examining articles on food banks. I asked learners to look at two articles from the Mail and the Guardian and to reflect critically upon their social and political context; how this may or may not impact upon their own beliefs on the topic; the content and language of the two articles – the inclusions, omissions, and their implications; and lastly to think about the audience the articles were aimed at, and the beliefs of the writer. This was an extremely successful lesson because students realised that language/discourse is never neutral, and so they must question everything they see, hear or read. Thus for example the Guardian will write from a left-of-centre viewpoint and the Mail from right-of-centre.

### **The Masters**

After completing the PGCE, I decided to do the Masters. This was another step up academically which opened my eyes further to the impact of philosophy on educational policy, and in particular to the history of the Lifelong Learning discourse and its current skills-based agenda.

### ***Understanding Lifelong Learning Policy***

Since the 1980s lifelong learning policies have seen important changes in many nations around the world. It has increasingly been conceived of in terms of an *economic imperative*, both in terms of policy and practice. The OECD (1997) and EU (Van der Pas, 2001) have been instrumental in achieving a change in the discourse of lifelong learning under the guise of the '*learning economy*'. This contrasts with pre-1980's policies which viewed lifelong learning as being "a personal good and as an inherent aspect of democratic life" (Biesta 2006:169).

Before the Masters, not knowing the history of lifelong learning or its purpose and philosophical underpinnings, I had bought into the idea of its skills-based learning economy agenda. However, having worked in both the private and public sectors teaching Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL, I know that successive

governments have failed in their drive to develop literacy and numeracy provision in this country. The Skills for Life field has impressive statistics for the number of qualifications obtained since its inception, but this has been mostly an exercise in providing people with certificates to validate their levels. Ever-declining budgets, and a result-obsessed culture have resulted in a perverse state whereby those who really need education are not given it, and those who do not need it may be provided with it. For example, in my current place of employment if a student is judged unlikely to pass their exam a second time they will most likely not be offered a place to repeat the course. However, the elephant in the room, and the root cause – namely structural inequality - is rarely addressed.

In this learning economy, teachers are seen not as creative or knowledgeable but as transmitters of skills, of proscribed curricula, and not as "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 1988) who develop critically thinking citizens; instead teachers reproduce the ideologies of the hegemonic culture. The present skills-based agenda has less to do with mastery of the subject and more to do with economic 'functionality'. In case of ESOL learners, we provide them with the English that will help them to function as economic units as soon as possible, ignoring their pre-existing knowledge and experience. This aligns with the American pedagogue E.D. Hirsch's belief (1987) in the teaching of 'cultural literacy' - 'core knowledge' of facts, figures and phrases about historical events. A prime example of this would be the Citizenship Test which has become more a memory test of facts and figures than about the culture and values of this country. Hirsch's method perpetuates current hegemonic views of history and does not ask the student to be critical of facts and figures.

### ***Education as Empowerment***

CDA, and the writings of Foucault, and Gramsci, which heavily influenced CDA, have been instrumental in me becoming a more political teacher. Through Foucault one comes to recognise how the '[dominant] discourse constructs the topic, defining and producing the objects of our knowledge (cited in Hall 1997, p.72). Knowledge is power and assumes the authority of 'the truth' (cited *ibid* p.76). This aligns with Gramsci's idea that the hegemonic class project their thinking upon the subordinated - who come to believe this thinking as '*common sense*' and '*natural*'.

In both writers I found hope, because this hegemonic discourse can be contested. As Gramsci stated, such '*common sense* is not ... rigid and immobile but is continually transforming itself' (cited *ibid* p.73) (the changes in lifelong policies attest to this fact), and as such, affords opportunities for it to be resisted. But before that can take place, it is important, to recognise and question social norms – '*of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time*' (Foucault (1980) cited in Rabinow 1991, p.75).

### ***A New Beginning***

The Masters helped me understand that the role of Education/Literacy '*should be regarded as a way of preparing man for a social, civic and economic role that goes beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training consisting merely in the teaching of reading and writing*' (UNESCO (1965) cited in Eldred et al. 2007 p.7)

And now, as I embark on my PhD in the Philosophy of Education at the age of 44, it almost feels like a new beginning for me both as a person and as a teacher. I see all education now, not simply in terms of skills but in the Platonic/Aristotelian idea of fulfilment: in the forming of the body, mind and soul of a valued citizen, and that such learning should take place throughout one's life - all this I impress upon my learners. As for me, going back to education has rejuvenated and revitalized my being – mind, body and soul - I feel nourished, and as I enrol for yet another "qualification", positively grunted!

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