

## Collusion and Conversation in Educational Research

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*This article considers how the standardisation of language in current education policy and practice, and in educational research, effects a repression of language and thought. The article then seeks to outline how we might resist this. The article takes up Paul Standish's suggestion that educational research colludes in the repression of language, and therefore of thought, that is effected in part through policy-borrowing and the global dominance of the English language. Standish refers in particular to the rhetoric of social justice. This article considers the narrative research methodologies often employed in the name of social justice and the ways in which the accompanying notions of voice, dialogue, and conversation fail to provide a critique of current policy and practice. Rather, they further entrench the discourses that repress language and thought. With reference to Stanley Cavell's notion of 'conversation' and Bruno Latour's notion of 'composition', the article discusses how we might proceed otherwise, exploring a mode of critique that is attentive to the conditions we find ourselves in today.*

### INTRODUCTION

Standardisation is now a common feature of transnational policy. One example can be found, for example, in the EU's statement of 'competences supporting lifelong learning', which states the need for a 'common language' (OJEU, 2010, p. 2) of education, training, and work, thus ensuring transparency, and removing the need for translation. A further example of this is the European Qualifications Framework, which has standardised the level of qualifications between countries. This ensures that educational attainment is recognised and thereby transferable between EU member state countries to enable mobility of persons and comparability of national performance. Also, as part of this general trend, research methods training has become streamlined and standardised in order to ensure all those pursuing postgraduate study have been similarly inducted into what it means to be a researcher today, and prepared for their research career in terms of the possible methods and methodologies available. Such standardisation ensures a parity between educational policies and practices in member states of the EU as it seeks to enable mobility and productivity, and thereby its competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. But there is also another side to this, in which the openness and transparency that such common modes of accountability seek to provide, closes down other possibilities.

Recent analyses have illustrated how policies relating to citizenship, lifelong learning, and intercultural dialogue in Europe today inculcate the individual into a language of culture, citizenship, and democracy that is depoliticized, aimed as they are at consensus and conflict avoidance (Biesta, 2009; Hodgson, 2011). This is evident in the discourse of voice, narrative, and dialogue prevalent in current policy (Hodgson, 2012). This depoliticised rendering of democracy and citizenship, elsewhere referred to as the governmentalisation of democracy (Simons & Masschelein, 2010) can be said to deny disagreement and conflict as inherent aspects of political life, particularly in the way it

seeks to standardise the language in which dialogue takes place (see Hodgson, 2012). The technologies that exist to account for citizenship and democracy, and in the name of which we are asked to account for ourselves, effect a form of immunisation (Masschelein and Simons, 2002). That is to say that the governmentalisation of the notion of voice and our relationships to others denies the very nature of subjectivity, constituted in our exposure to and answerability to the other.

In a recent paper, presented at Kyoto University, Paul Standish raised the question of whether educational research colludes in a form of repression of thought and expression due to the language it uses and, moreover, fails to question (Standish, 2012)\*. Standish illustrates how a repression takes place through practices of policy-borrowing and the global domination of English, which leads to a standardisation of language. Standish illustrated this in particular with reference to the way in which the notion of social justice is used.

The notions of voice and social justice are prevalent in the field of educational research where they are used to provide a critique of current policy and practice. Educational research concerned with social justice often employs particular methodologies concerned with voice and identity—e.g. life history, narrative research—and is often shaped by a particular politics—of emancipation, of recognition, the politics of identity—that shapes the reading of the philosophical texts on which such methodologies are based (Hodgson and Standish, 2009). As argued elsewhere, the manner of the use of poststructuralism in work concerned with identity politics suggests a reluctance to let go of the stable human subject (Mayo, 2000). Analysis therefore takes place at the level of the identity category according to which the subject is identified (e.g. race, gender, sexuality) in order that the individual voices their own experience of that categorisation as a form and means of gaining social justice. The understanding of poststructuralism in educational research places the subject as central, as it is the site of rights, justice, voice, and identity. As such, rather than disrupt the dominant mode of subjectivation (Foucault, 1986, 2005), this serves only to shore up a particular identity, one that answers to the demands to account for ourselves in particular ways (Hodgson, 2009).

Research for social justice often employs an understanding of narrative, then, that does not disrupt the commonplace ways in which we are asked to account for ourselves in education today e. g. through learner profiles, as reflective practitioners, or in the concern with the researcher's positionality. Such research often fits our expectations of narrative, of a learning journey, with particular outcomes at the end: a more certain identity, a step towards an ideal self, the realisation of one's true potential.

In this article, I will take up Bruno Latour's notion of 'composition' (Latour, 2010) to argue that this mode of thinking about voice and social justice are characteristic of an orthodoxy of critique in educational research that is not sufficient to grasp the reality in which we live today. The concern with social justice that informs the use of narrative research methods seems, on Latour's account, to derive from the conditions of another time—the time of time—and thus fails to gain critical purchase today. The emancipatory politics underlying critical research in this vein is predicated on a particular notion of human progress that, arguably, no longer applies. Furthermore, such orthodoxies further entrench the monolingual mode of speaking about education and the human subject that Paul Standish draws our attention to.

Against this background of the standardisation of language in policy and the collusion of education in this, I wish to consider how we might proceed otherwise. That is, I wish to address the question of how we as academics—or students, or teachers, or citizens—can proceed in the face of current conditions, in the name of education and democracy, when any certainty about the meaning of these

terms seems to be lost.

Before turning to Latour, I will draw on Standish's discussion of Stanley Cavell's use of the term 'conversation' (Standish, 2012). In contrast to the language of education policy and research, which seeks cooperation, and is constitutive of the immunisation and governmentalisation identified above, Cavell's nuanced use of the term acknowledges its inherent instability, and thus acknowledges this to be a feature of human subjectivity.

I will begin by recounting Standish's discussion of Cavell's disagreement with John Rawls over the notion of co-operation in relation to social justice and democracy. The notions of voice and conversation that emerge form part of a rich understanding of their role in the constitution of subjectivity and of democracy. Discussing this alongside the work of Latour begins to suggest an understanding of research that does not collude in the current discourses and practices of standardisation and thus resists the depoliticising that is effected in policy and practice and the utopianism of orthodoxies of critique in research.

## II

Paul Standish draws attention to Cavell's critique of John Rawls' emphasis on cooperation, in particular due to the influence of Rawlsian political liberalism in thinking about justice in education:

'Cooperation', as a general state of social interaction, suggests the idea of society as a whole either as having a project or, at the other extreme, as being a neutral field in which each can pursue his or her own projects. Intuitively these extremes are analogous to aspects of the interesting institution of competitive games.

The idea of 'conversation', in contrast, emphasizes neither a given social project nor a field of fairness for individual projects. (Nor, as I have insisted, does it deny the importance of these ideas.) (Cavell, 2004, pp. 173-174 cited in Standish, 2012).

Conversation, then, Standish writes, is 'the field within which I might discover what my projects might be' (Standish, 2012). There is a finality in the notion of cooperation that Cavell objects to. Cooperation implies reaching a consensus, and further that there is a notion or state of justice or democracy towards which we are working. The notion of conversation indicates something more immanent, and continual.

Standish draws attention to the particular nuance of the term 'conversation' in Cavell's work:

Cavell finds in the second syllable of 'conversation' ('-vers-'—cf. reversal, diversion, averse) the suggestion of a turning of thought such that it cannot proceed solely, and in many respects does not proceed best, when it travels along straight, systematic lines: openness to conversation, a readiness to be turned (to be shaped, fashioned, sometimes diverted, sometimes rebuffed), require that I do not seek to shore up my own identity but rather am ready for new possibilities—that is, ready to become (Standish, 2012).

The notion of conversation in Cavell's work admits the exposure and answerability inherent in our condition of living together, and is shaped by his Emersonian moral perfectionism. Here, a further distinction between conversation and Rawls' notion of cooperation appears. Rawls takes perfectionism to be a teleological doctrine (Cavell, 1990, p. xviii; Rawls, 2005, p. 326). On Rawls'

account, perfectionism is inherently elitist, as it seeks excellence, and therefore advantages the few, and so works against the demands of justice and democracy (Cavell, 1990, p. 3). Cavell counters this and seeks to show why any theory of justice must accommodate perfectionism if it is to be a human account: 'I find Emerson's version of perfectionism to be essential to the criticism of democracy from within... Emersonian Perfectionism does not imply perfectibility—nothing in Emerson is more constant than his scorn of the idea that any given state of what he calls the self is the last' (ibid.). Perfectionism holds democracy—as well as education, and one's self—to be always still to come, rejecting not only the possibility, but also the morality, of perfectibility. The critique of democratic society comes not from comparison with a utopian ideal, then, but entails our attending to the constitution of democracy today. This entails also attending to my role in this. As Naoko Saito states, on this view 'self-criticism and social-criticism are conjoined' (Saito, 2005, pp. 54-55).

### III

The discourse of Rawlsian political liberalism is one of two elaborations that Paul Standish identifies as being 'apt discursively to determine educational thought' about matters of social justice (Standish, 2012). The other derives from a neo-Marxist politics of emancipation, as often found in critical pedagogy. There is, then, a Utopian aspect to this: given a voice and due recognition each individual will live freely and equally. Bruno Latour (Latour, 2010) seems to suggest, however, that the emancipatory politics that underpin critique in this vein no longer gain any purchase on reality, and that the transcendent, utopian idea of justice sought no longer has any critical force. I will recount Latour's notion of 'composition' here before indicating how this relates to the notion of conversation in Cavell's work, and then considering how we might proceed in light of these accounts.

Latour associates the transcendent, utopian understanding of human existence and its future with 'the time of time' (Latour, 2010, p. 472). It is an understanding characteristic of the modern period, and one which is aptly illustrated by shifts in the understanding of the individual and society in relation to education, as elaborated by Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein (2008). They identify a shift in the conception of time and space from the historical self-understanding structured by a fixed, linear history and a utopian notion of societal destiny operative in the modern period, to an environmental self-understanding prevalent today (p. 697). The reconceptualisation of space as 'environments' (as in for example the learning environment, or the work environment) stresses our relationship to the 'here and now':

To regard oneself as inhabiting an environment implies that one's self-understanding is focused on present capacities and opportunities to meet present challenges and needs. Of paramount importance are the capacities and resources that one has at one's disposal and therefore it is indispensable to have transparent and up-to-date information on what is available here and now. This environmental self-understanding implies a particular conception of the past and the future (p. 695).

The historical self-understanding existed in the evolutionary understanding of progress constitutive of the modern self, as standing separate from history and situated within a historical process, a teleological story of emancipation and progress, 'towards a glorious future' (p. 696). In an environmental self-understanding, a teleological narrative within a fixed temporality is displaced by

the permanent confrontation by conditions to which we are asked to adapt and to take responsibility. It demands a permanent reorientation of oneself within one's environment in response to the resources available.

The narrative of progress of the modern period, Latour writes, 'was predicated on the idea that the flow of time has one—and only one—*inevitable* and *irreversible* direction', and on the 'inevitable march of *progress*' (p. 472). The mode of critique that engendered such progress then is no longer sufficient for the current environmental self-understanding in which we are permanently responding and adapting to uncertain conditions in the name of entrepreneurial self-investment. Latour contrasts 'critique', then, with the notion of 'composition':

With critique, you may debunk, reveal, unveil, but only as long as you establish, through this process of creative destruction, a privileged access to the world of reality behind the veils of appearances. Critique, in other words, has all the limits of utopia: it relies on the certainty of the world *beyond* this world. By contrast for compositionism, there is no world beyond. It is all about *immanence* (p. 474).

In setting out this notion he seeks to:

[make] explicit (that is, manifest) a subtle but radical transformation in the definition of what it means to progress, that is, to *process* forward and meet new prospects. Not as a war cry for an avant-garde to move even further and faster ahead, but rather as a warning, a call to attention, so as to *stop* going further *in the same way* as before toward the future... It is as if we had to move from an idea of inevitable progress to one of *tentative and precautionary progression*. There is still a movement. Something is still going forward. But...the tenor is entirely different (p. 473).

For compositionists, he writes, the 'continuity of space and time is not given', 'they have to compose it, slowly and progressively. And, moreover, to compose it from discontinuous pieces' (pp. 481-482). He writes: 'We need to have a much more mundane, more immanent, much more realistic, much more embodied definition of the material world if we wish to compose a common world' (p. 482). The term 'compositionism' 'underlines that things have to be put together (Latin *componere*) while retaining their heterogeneity' (Latour, 2010, p. 473). Latour connects this notion also with composure, and thus to art, painting, music, theatre, and dance; to compromise and compromising; and also to compost and decomposition (ibid.). Such work is painstaking, it demands an attentiveness to the conditions of our own constitution.

## CONCLUSION

For Latour, we now face no future but many prospects, to be composed by 'being firmly attentive to the task at hand' (p. 484). This requires us 'to care, to move slowly, with caution and precaution' (ibid.). The mode, or ethics, of reading that Paul Standish calls for and that is evident in Cavell's work attests to a humility in the face of things, an exposure to reality that permits us to be unsettled, and to make only tentative, speculative steps. It does not offer philosophy or theory of education as expertise. Cavell's work offers a particular form of critique, then. In the practice of thought and writing itself he is attentive to the compromise that citizenship entails. His aversion to the idea of

cooperation is not only its sense of easy settlement but also the sense of compliance with historical principles of justice. Instead conversation is invoked as the necessary condition of our living together, predicated on listening and our answerability to the other. As Standish writes:

Plainly this is to take conversation not as just any kind of verbal exchange between people but to idealise it as something to be aspired towards. And plainly, given that Emerson is never far from Cavell's account, the readiness to be fashioned cannot be an acquiescence in conformity. Emerson says of conversation that its laws are 'analogous to the laws of society' and that it is the 'first office of friendship' (Emerson, 1961, p. 292), where the friend is not someone who merely reinforces my identity, who secures me where I am, but rather someone ready to challenge me towards my next, best possibility... It is in this spirit that Emerson advocates a kind of self-reliance, not as individualistic autonomy but as the kind of receptivity, openness, and resourcefulness that is achieved in the act of abandonment (see, for example, Saito, 2005, p. 147) (Standish, 2012).

The sense of conversation here, shaped by Cavell's Emersonian moral perfectionism chimes with the manner of composition. And education, in a particular sense, is inherent in both. As Standish and Saito capture it: 'Education leads not so much upward, toward some kind of ethereal transcendence, as downward and back to the rough ground, with each new step we take, each moment of crisis, affording a new *point d'appui*' (Standish and Saito, 2012, p. 7).

I do not intend here to try to fully align Paul Standish or Stanley Cavell position with that of Bruno Latour, but rather to show how they offer a release from the discourses that govern thinking and therefore research, discourses that form an international orthodoxy, responsive to the demands of policy and of competitiveness and comparability. As Paul Standish notes, the discourses of justice that pervade educational research can become ideological. The particular zeal with which social justice is pursued means that it becomes difficult to argue against. After all, poverty, persecution, and prejudice still abound. But, it seems we have decided what to do about this: education is always part of the solution. But yet, we also speak about the failure of education. It seems we are at a point at which previous (modern) certainties no longer apply. But yet, in educational research at least, they remain sacred.

The discussion here sought to explore texts that opened the way for thinking otherwise. They do not provide critique in the sense of teaching us how to proceed. But therein, I suggest, lies their critical force. They alert us to that which no longer applies and thus that unsettles our comfortable mode of response. They ask us to attend to ourselves in our critique as much as to the policy or practice we are addressing, by acknowledging that what we do does not stand outside of these things but is constitutive of them. They call on us not to 'do' research that seeks solutions in the pursuit of progress, but rather to re-search, to look again.

## NOTE

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