

PRACTITIONER'S INSIGHTS

Change? But I've spent 15 years perfecting my teaching practice. I know much of what there is to know.

Margaret Giroux

**Unlimited Paenga Tawhiti School
& University of Canterbury, New Zealand**

In this article I try to map my own learning process over the past 18 months when engaging with ideas around '21st century learners', postmodernity, the knowledge society and the new New Zealand School Curriculum. I experiment with autoethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Elis & Bochner, 2000) to create a situated personal narrative of some of my questions, struggles and insights in facing the need to change my frames of reference as a teacher. Using one of the definitions of critical literacy offered in this journal (Souza & Andreotti, 2008), I interpret my experience with these 'new' ideas as one of becoming 'literate': of making sense of connections and processes related to the negotiations of knowledge, language, power and identity. This is of course not a finished process for me. One of the things that I have learned in this learning journey is that critical literacy is not a 'state of being', but a process of 'always becoming', of creating different meanings as you learn, unlearn and learn again (and again and again).

The new New Zealand Curriculum champions the idea of 21st century education. It works with a profile of learners who will work in 'knowledge societies' and proposes an idea of knowledge that can be interpreted as postmodern. However, changing policies does not mean that practices will be changed: how do teachers trained in '20th century' ways start to think about education in the 21st? And how can they shift their thinking and become more critical and autonomous? What political and ethical tensions does this push for a shift create? What opportunities are there for really doing things differently? The narrative about my learning process illustrates my own struggles with some of these questions.

Working at a special character school with a reputation as a national and international icon for the promotion of 21st century education, I was sure I had much of what the new NZC document would purport as necessary. I was looking forward to the document with much anticipation. How much of it was based on what my school already did? How would it reinforce what my school was already doing? How would it reflect our genius?

Before the final release of the NZC, I came across Jane Gilbert's (2005) book "Catching the Knowledge Wave? The Knowledge Society and the Future of Education", which was framed as an influential book in terms of the thinking behind the new document. In this book, Gilbert makes a distinction between the role of education in industrial societies and the role of education in post-modern societies. She makes several suggestions that matched practices encouraged by my school. She also discussed many concepts that raised tensions within me. These concepts called for a deeper reflection and challenged my identity and practice. Two ideas especially jarred my complacency. The first was that knowledge should start to be seen as a 'verb', as something that is socially constructed and that 'does' things. The pedagogical implication of this is that learners should be taught about how knowledge is constructed in the different disciplines and how they – themselves –

can engage in the construction of knowledge. The second idea was the possibility that 20th century experienced teachers might find the new requirements difficult.

If the first idea reflects the new demands of the knowledge society (i.e. the context of 21st century learners), a tension for my own professional practice was raised: could it be that after 15 years of professional experience and development I was still so conditioned by what Gilbert described as 20th century thinking, treating knowledge as a noun? I was struck by the possibility that I could have spent years of my life perfecting methods for making the transmission of knowledge more engaging and exciting without much consideration for how this knowledge was constructed or the implications of reproducing it. My professional identity was grounded on the pride of having found innovative and creative ways of getting my students to grasp what was said to be important for them to know. I had asked them to be critical thinkers within the subject but not of the subject. I had asked them to work with the knowledge but not to create something new. Not that I think that this is a fruitless exercise, I still think that transmitting or communicating ideas is important. However, what I had missed was outlined in the second tension that came to my attention through Gilbert's writing. That is, how my choice to focus on transmission was conditioned by the social-historical context of my own education and, although this choice offered certain opportunities for my students to participate in the world, it also left other opportunities out.

Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler's (2008) book "Engaging Minds" continued to challenge my focus on knowledge transmission. They discuss the dangers of thinking you 'know' *the* answer. How an unexamined acceptance of generally accepted ('common sense') practice could continue many of the same inequities and narrow interpretations of knowledge that our cultural/educational frames of reference have created. They emphasise the partiality of these frames of reference and the dangers of being unaware of them:

What is troublesome is the failure to notice the existence of these partialities. Such ignorance can allow dangerous complacencies – believing that enough is known, being comfortable with/in prevailing ideologies, not concerning oneself with the ethical obligation to be attentive to other worldviews, not attending to the impact of one's actions on other phenomena (Davis et. Al., 2008, p. 8).

Was I quite unconsciously propagating the status quo? Was I promoting my world-view and only getting students to be critical of what *I* thought should be criticised? Was I unfairly seeing education as the great emancipator and equaliser? If it was 'equalising' to whose equity was I trying to direct? Was I inadvertently helping maintain an imperialistic economically driven status quo? Was my practice educating, advocating, or informing.¹ When and why were those choices made?

What were other 'experts' on 21st century education saying? I perused hundreds of websites from UNESCO, Ted Talks, You Tube films, and sites that had established themselves as 'knowers' of what is needed to meet the needs of 21st century learners. I read books, articles, attended workshops and held intense conversations with people.

What I realised in my search for answers was that what is perceived to be the needs of 21st century learners depends greatly on one's guiding understanding of society and the role of education. Each perspective added to the old ideas a 'twist', a focus that was driving what would be emphasised and valued. Taking a critical look at each perspective I noticed that rarely did any of them challenge the idea that education should first and foremost serve the economy and standardise a specific form of knowing as a universal ideal. Instead, they seemed to build upon the system by

pointing out the flaw in the system from their area of interest and providing a solution that would make learning more effective in meeting the needs of the new economy. Nevertheless, there seemed to be general consensus around a few ideas: education should be more relevant, engaging, allowing multiple perspectives and identities (Gee, 2004), offering opportunities for creativity and powerful learning (Claxton, 2008) and helping students to learn to deal with uncertainty and complexity (Gilbert, 2005).

This 'new' thinking creates a tension in the old system that has traditionally seen knowledge as fixed and certain with the teacher as the repository of answers. In the 'old' system, teachers have traditionally played the role of knowledge holders. Their identities have been built around accumulated knowledge, as well as 'trade secret' strategies that ensured success in their context. They got used to only feeling confident if they had the answers. At the heart of this model was the belief that students would (learn to) see the world as their teachers did and that if they acquired this knowledge they would do well in the world: they would be able to reproduce social life (i.e. the status quo) as it should be.

My reading of the literature on 21st century education was pointing to the fact that teachers were to have a very different role if they were to meet the needs of 21st century learners. As a teacher, I was to be seen and experienced by my students as a learner. I was to shift the security of '*my knowing*' to a place of learning, to a place of uncertainty and inclusion of other possibilities (Claxton, 2008). I was also called upon to raise my awareness in the role I play in transmitting not only knowledge but ideologies. I was asked to view the world from multiple perspectives and give up the security of absolute answers: I was called to see all answers as context bound and provisional (Andreotti & Souza, 2008). I needed to look at how the universalisation of one way of knowing had disenfranchised a population of students who worked from other frameworks (Bishop & Glynn, 2000).

I was scared. I was thrown into a deep pool of uncertainty and guilt. Most of what I 'knew' and believed was being deeply challenged. If I 'gave-up' viewing things from my known perspective would I feel my life experience and 'knowing' were not valued? The ideology I held had allowed me to negotiate through life experiences. In being open and reflective with my students and wider community would I lose something of myself? How would I sit with the pain and discomfort of 'not knowing'? Would I be seen as 'flaky' and 'flip-flopping' on ideas if I didn't have firm boundaries? What would I be able to offer as a guide if I, myself, was not absolutely certain of the way?

In looking ahead I saw a few options. I knew I could no longer function as I had but I had to choose a way forward. For several months my response was that I could just stop. I could quit and work in a café. I wouldn't have to carry around the responsibility. I could forget it all and just be nice to people and not have to deal with all this cognitive mess.

The second option was to accept that I am working from a place of new beginnings and that I don't know all I can/should/would like to know about this 'new' way of doing things and the new possibilities. I had to recognise that, as the old way was limited and full of problems, the new ways will also have their own limitations - and create new problems - and this is not a reason not to test them out and learn from the process. Doing nothing was no longer an option, it would mean being complicit with something I now distrusted. I am aware that I will still be complicit in things I am still not aware of, but I am no longer afraid to face them with the courage to unlearn and relearn again - and again.

I prefer to turn all the self-doubt into questions that reflect a deeply held idea that things can and do change. What is possible in the new way? Instead of being afraid I wanted to look at what might open up. What could be made thinkable that in the past was unthinkable because we had never been able to imagine that way before? What is there in the 'new' way that may actually allow more students to feel connected to their histories and the histories of 'others'. How would multi-perspectives allow us all to think, to know and to relate in innovative and unexpected ways? What might be provided by educating students in ways that allows them to come to their own decisions about things? What if they could think beyond what the media and market dictates to them? I started to feel inspired.

What is absolutely fantastic about all of this is that I have come to understand I AM in fact still a learner. That the opportunity presented by this new curriculum document allows me to stop, to reflect deeply, and to find a new way to meet my students at the door. In seeing this as a learning journey I have found a way to be invigorated to face the challenges and demonstrate the 'learner' qualities I hope to see: resilience, diversity of ideas and knowledge, learning to learn, learning to unlearn, being open, and that it is not only okay not to know the answer, but it can be absolutely liberating.

Something that 'rocks our boats' (as teachers) and challenges our everyday experiences presents the opportunity for us to critique the ideologies we live by and to develop new ways of seeing, relating, knowing and doing in the world – new literacies. The journey through that critique can be so frightening and overwhelming that we want to turn our eyes from continuing to see. However, it is only in looking more closely at the pain and unacknowledged complicity that we can begin to move forward. Once we have experienced this, and learned from it, we can use the strength gained from that journey to see a different path to journey upon and learn from, and then we see another path to journey upon and learn from, and then we see...

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