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TROUBLING

TERRAINS

Tactics for traversing and transforming
contemporary educational research

Editors
Robyn Henderson
and
Patrick Alan Danaher



2008

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Contents

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Preface

Nita Temmerman

We all know that research is a constructive means for educators to uncover information about associations among various learning-teaching related variables. We also know that there are already many useful books out there to support educators hungry to unearth, analyse and evaluate such data. So what can you expect from a research book entitled *Troubling terrains* and how is it going to value-add to the multitude of existing educational research references?

The intent of this book is to complement existing texts with a firm focus on the association between terrains or sites that are at times divisive and controversial and the inevitable interplay of challenging interests within different educational terrains. You can look forward to a multiplicity of views, which challenge the reader to think about and understand more fully how what constitutes education in different terrains can be transformed.

The book explores multiple terrains as diverse as the early childhood landscape, school spaces, higher education locations including further education and training and university, and 'virtual' territories. Contributors engage with the concept of *troubling* from the perspective of what they and the players in educational terrains bring to bear in and on those terrains; and the capacity of these same players to transform these terrains for the better.

It is a valuable up-to-date resource for students engaged in educational research, as well as a worthwhile reference for more experienced researchers and educators in the broadest sense, regardless of their specialisation area. The mix of international authors importantly provides significant critical perspectives that draw on a diversity of methodologies and theoretical perspectives, but within the overarching framework of questioning long-held understandings that have informed contemporary educational research.

The editors have extensive experience working with postgraduate education research students at universities in Queensland, Australia and a proven track record of supervision success. They are committed to research-led teaching and engaging colleagues and students in professional conversations about the practice of educational research. Robyn and Patrick anticipate that the book will transform how research is perceived. I expect they will achieve their aim.

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Foreword

Rob Walker

Since the 1980s, it seems we have seen educational policy become more and more certain in its assumption that education is a straightforward and unified process that has only to be managed well if it is to achieve excellence. In order to sustain this view, policy (by which I include the mainstream of government, management and sections of the media) has captured significant elements of educational research and directed its attention to questions of means rather than ends. Thus testing, reviews of evidence-based inquiry and applications of information technology have taken the major share of funding, shaped the careers of researchers and academics, and focused the attention of the media. Perhaps curiously, this reduction in imagination about what teaching and learning are has been accompanied by a frenzied energy around innovation. But what innovation often means in schools, colleges and universities, and even in the wider sphere of public education, is the introduction of more systematised processes – more things that need to be done each day, each week and each semester. Perhaps it means a new reading scheme to introduce, a risk assessment to be made, a new set of forms to fill in, another policy requiring documented evidence of compliance.

Historians may well challenge my assumption that this is a new turn, and argue that educational policy has always operated with some certainty that education is not a difficult or contentious process, just difficult to manage and direct, because of its size and in-built inefficiencies. What we have seen though is a greater use of the processes of micro-management – a greater confidence on the part of those who manage systems that they can act to improve ‘delivery’ at the levels of the school, the classroom and the student, and less reliance on the professional knowledge of teachers or trust in the judgement of children.

Often, too, this belief in the increasing poverty of the intellectual resources of schools is coupled to a belief that there are better resources that can be drawn into education from outside. Consultants from the private sector, strategies, concepts and language borrowed from management and software from the information technology industries have all been driven into educational institutions in forms that are less often optional than coercive.

In the United Kingdom, recent New Labour governments have continued with policies designed in the Thatcher years that, while they use the language of ‘excellence’, are more truthfully about ‘standards’. Rightly identifying a key

weakness in education being that we have consistently failed to overcome the dominance of social factors in securing equality of outcomes, policy has focused on using achievement testing to set standards and inspection to drive effort in individual schools and colleges.

We seem to have created an organisational culture, perhaps borrowed from business but echoing our own use of worksheets and lesson plans. But where does this lead? Where are the escape routes (if any) that might allow creativity back into the educational process?

While innovation has become part of management and so institutionalised, another way of searching for innovation is to look to see where in educational systems you can detect signs of active imaginative energy. Many of the accounts in this book do just this. They point to, describe and analyse imagination actively at work in classrooms, schools, colleges and universities, and the minds of teachers and students. They find this energy is in a wide range of places and settings, some mundane, some exotic and some marginal: in a child's experience of a new school, in the spaces created by illness, moral panic, rural isolation, gender, race and cultural difference.

The way these accounts are told is important. They are all personal, all first hand, 'storied', all thoughtful and touching on questions of identity and personal change. This is very different from the research accounts that have come to be associated with policy, which are rarely personal, almost always second or third hand and told with an objective voice in a tense which we can think of as the 'policy present'. This is a form that gives brief accounts (at most a few paragraphs) of innovative programs that describes them in a continuing present that allows little scope for appreciation of the complexities of change or raises questions about organisational tensions. People figure only as individual heroes who overcome organisational inertia by personal energy and evangelism. The cases that are described are about ideas and novel practices grafted on to existing practice in what appear to be unproblematic ways, replacing previous practices, which are depicted as weak, inadequate or outdated, and perhaps by implication about energetic and enthused teachers likewise replacing an outdated and discredited older generation.

It is significant that many of the accounts included here are written by doctoral students, for much of the mainstream of educational research has been effectively incorporated within the new policy vision, bought off by large grants and consultancies and by the promise that high level positions provide academics with the power to be influential and bring about significant systematic change.

Where creative research in education is to be found is increasingly in the work of students. Those academics who remain outside the world of policy find not only their work marginalised, ignored or dismissed but also their working lives intensified in much the same way as that of teachers and students in schools. In some systems we are inspected in the same way and there are some

areas in which testing has been introduced. It is in the work of students that innovative educational research survives, but only just.

The curriculum theorist Lawrence Stenhouse (1980) used to define research as "systematic inquiry made public" (p. 1). Academics often confuse the idea of 'making public' with publication in high status (peer reviewed) journals, but what Stenhouse meant was that it was important to expose research to informed criticism, not just by other academics but also by practitioners. Only in this way, he argued, could we create communities of informed practice (including students and families) that would be capable of real change. Individual case studies, in this view, are less important than the dialogue and discussion that can form around a corpus of work. The role of publication is not to celebrate the talent or individualism of the author but to share experience and ideas.

Bringing postgraduate and early career research work together in a public form is important because it is one of the features of doctoral programs that either they institutionalise the work (as in many of the high status universities and in the ways in which the journals and conferences of the large professional associations proceed) or they prevent synthesis and the formation of critical energy by keeping the work individualised, private and hidden. This book is important because it makes ideas and experience open to others and because, while terrain might be contested, it provides an initial map of common ground.

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