

Why are we so afraid to play in the mud?

The purpose of this writing is an attempt to reconcile 3 distinct moments in my thinking over the last 30 days, and perhaps offer an opportunity to move forward. The three moments are 1) the Education Without Borders conference during the day of Saturday October 15th at Sasamat Lake, 2) an incident that occurred later that very evening in Vancouver over an exchange with someone I met that day, and 3) the Michael Apple 'invitation-only' education lecture at the Wosk Centre for Dialogue on Tuesday November 15th.

The central theme of the first moment was that of a disconnect between Theory and Practice, and the need to better understand the boundaries and borders between the two – imagined or not. Heeson Bai and Sean Blenkinsop provided what some described as an insightful introduction to the idea during the first panel discussion of the day. From Heeson's drawn apple as a representation of a real apple, we take away a sense of an odd dichotomy that is far too often constructed, namely, a drawing of an apple can only represent so much of a real apple, and vice versa. By looking at a drawing of an apple, am I supposed to think back and savour the taste of the last real apple, is that its entire purpose? When looking at a real apple in my fridge, am I supposed to think back to some romanticized image of what an apple should look like in a painting? The two representations, drawn and real, seem to be constructed with an expectation that the one should illicit some connection to the other. I find a flaw with this idea for it seems to be premised on a concept that the two are the same and therefore one representation naturally leads to the other. Sean's lively and humorous rendition of the theory of capture the flag and how it is a microcosm for the themes of the conference left me fulfilled much the same way as the readings of Shank: instantly excited and satiated, but then remarkably empty and jaded after a chance to digest. His initial notion of there being only one field of play was quite interesting: with a solid border down the middle separating the two teams, a fluid boundary around the whole field of play, and barriers and obstacles scattered all around the field. The border cutting the field in half is arbitrary and creates, yet again, a false dichotomy. Mind you, that is the point in capture the flag where the purpose is competition, but is that the point in education? Over and over and over again, we hear about the dichotomy, but I offer the following: how often do you discover the dichotomy for yourself? I'm told about it, I read about it. Do I experience it personally? Does anyone? My theory and my practice seem to be one entity, but I am told by the confines and the construct of this way of thinking that I am wrong and not in tune with the general consensus. How this general consensus is constructed and what underlying history influenced this consensus seems to be just as important as its current application. Michel Foucault's concept of Power and its multitude of capillaries which permeate everything, including all decisions, conscious or unconscious, seem to be quite relevant in this regard. Foucault argued that the only way to circumvent this Power was to understand that it is present and therefore needs to be understood to make a relatively free decision (for we can never make a truly free decision). Shifting back to Sean's dichotomy of a border, permeable as it may be, which separates Research and Theory, I would argue that there are two questions that should cross one's mind when interrogating this concept: 1) Who built that border (and therefore patrols it)? 2) What is that border meant to separate? Is it the academic institutions that

sprung up in the Middle Ages which quickly become the brokers of power, authority, legitimacy and ‘true’ knowledge? Is it an increasingly complacent public (of which practitioners must traverse and learn to co-exist), who’s prominent discourses have eroded into the fickle musings of Donald Trump defining the characteristics of ‘success’, where the craving for higher level knowledge seems to have been displaced by the economic realities of credentials being more important? These are important questions to understand - for an answer may not be possible as their complexity seems overwhelming. Dan Laitsch, a professor of education from SFU Surrey provided the first step in allowing me to understand that these questions exist and are important

(<http://www.sfu.ca/~dlaitsch/borderspres.pdf>). At the time of his presentation, I found myself more enthralled by the fact that here was an academic interrogating the evil “right-wing” and its conspiracy to dismantle free knowledge dissemination (i.e. ERIC and the Department of Education under the Bush administration). But there was an underlying theme to his presentation that I did not understand at the time...only when I was eaves-dropping to a conversation he was having with Paul Shaker during lunch did it come into focus: the right-wing does not build that border between it and the public – or at least not visibly. Research is practice, and practice is research – the right is willing to just throw its ideas out there, as all it cares about is that it is being heard. That is why the right is winning – paraphrasing Paul Shaker. If the public hears one discourse from a particular ideological bent, in this case the right, and not from the other side as the left seems to have built these borders around itself and its ‘true’ higher level knowledge, what is the result? Mind you, this did not happen overnight, but as Dan discussed in his presentation, over the last 30-35 years in the United States. As the left (that’s us), has been musing over the divide between theory and practice, without ever allowing itself to seriously interrogate its own complicity in constructing the divide to serve some long-lost and forgotten purpose, the agenda for what is important in education has been lost to the interests of the right.

So I pose the following question: What is the point of spending a weekend discussing the divide between theory and practice for a group that no longer has a competent (or audible) voice in the public sphere?

The central theme of the second moment is that of discomfort leading to frustration leading to anger leading to irrational thought/behaviour. I would argue that this is in fact one theme and not a series of themes, for it was a progression or stream-of-thought I travelled through on the evening of the conference on October 15th. Remarkably, I can remember very little of the exact details on the topic of education reform at the institutional level I was discussing with a peer from the conference as we drove back into Vancouver. Categorizing me as representing the left-side of the discussion/argument and he the right-side would be far too much of a simplification. Surface and deep approaches might be more apt, for while I attempted to breakdown topics and lines of thinking to their component and representational parts (what does in mean in this context, and from where does it attribute its meaning), he took a compartmentalized approach of equated a topic to a cubby-hole, which he could manipulate on mass without delving into the intricacies of the initial topic.

This was frustrating to say the least – for both of us. We understood the other’s argument, but trivialized it openly to the other for there was no common discourse at

work, or at least, no value placed upon the other's choice of discourse. Needless to say, neither one of us were going to let this go and just accept that there was no common ground. Especially since I was losing the argument, and he knew it. While I attempted to take his ideas and extend them into my analysis, there was nothing on his part, for why should there be as I was engaging in a discourse of his choosing, his metaphors, his vernacular. In this process, had I made my point of view completely illegitimate? Voices were raised, and the culmination of all this frustration took a turn toward an incident that is not my proudest moment. As a child, I had been in a few scrapes on the school yard, as a young man I have been 'swarmed' and attacked on a street by a group of random youths, and I am sure that I could have handled those situations better, but I had never initiated anything in my life – especially while engaging in an academic dialogue. Losing the argument, feeling frustrated, angry and perhaps more importantly, very prostrated and vulnerable, I changed the discourse to a personal verbal attack which moved away from the initial topics. Needless to say, that led to other things of a physical sense for which I was completely in the wrong. I knew I was in the wrong then and felt very guilty and ashamed for it for a period after the fact...but only recently have I formed a better understanding as to how I reached that point of being so completely out-manoeuvred in that discussion and the sense of helplessness and irrelevance it created.

I will now jump to the third moment, the Michael Apple lecture, for it offered two distinct opportunities to reconcile the inner turmoil I had been feeling, namely, guilt over my complicity in a physical altercation and a fear that my ideas were irrelevant as they did not jive with the main discourses of the public sphere (in this case my peers). It was interesting to discuss the Michael Apple talk with some of my peers after the fact, for while those in the Education & Technology program that were present described it as the same old writings Dr. Apple has been publishing for the last 25 years and therefore the same 'irrelevant' arguments, some peers in different programs described it as an insightful interrogation of 'what we are still doing wrong' and therefore need to address now. Dr. Apple's talk, which consisted of him speaking about the importance of recognizing the 'growing' influences over the American education system, and then what exactly these influences were achieving, was fascinating. He identified an unspoken alliance between 4 groups that had taken control of the education agenda and the public space in which it is found:

- 1) neo-liberals whom argue the need to remove government control and allow a 'free-market' approach to education access
- 2) neo-conservatives whom represent a revisionist sentiment in decreasing the flow of 'free' knowledge
- 3) authoritarian populists whom represent the revisionist religious sentiments of churches and other faith based groups, though they may not share the zeal
- 4) managerialists whom are essentially those with credentials that wish to maintain a quota of others that share these credentials – thereby perpetuating their own importance, stature and economic standing.

Strange that when he mentioned the managerialists, my thoughts came back to the notion of what academia really is, and the walls it builds and perpetuates around itself.

After Dr. Apple finished, he was responded to by a panel of scholars representing different backgrounds, but which I will not describe as their comments were nothing out

of the norm. The interesting part of the talk occurred when the floor was opened for ‘free dialogue’ amongst attendees. While everyone spoke their piece regarding what they thought the important issues were – though they phrased it in such a way that Dr. Apple was left in a position to simply agree and then tell them why he agreed, Mark Wieller, SFU PhD student, asked the most poignant question of the evening: why is the left...or more specifically, education academics and practitioners, so complacent when it comes to the marked shift of education policy to the right – exclusionary policies now being enacted?

There was some superficial talk regarding this question, and then an education graduate student phrased it as follows: I see the discourses that are now important to the public sphere, and frankly, it is all fickle and meaningless in the end, so why should I respond...it seems almost beneath our role in the process.

Amazingly, no one, not one professional academic in the room, refuted this statement...but it did bring all of the ideas presented in this writing into focus.

After Dr. Apple’s talk, several grad students congregated in the foyer of the Wosk Centre and discussed this last statement, including as luck would have it, my peer of the evening of the 15-Oct after the Borders conference. Conclusions...well, that is hard to say, except for a general contempt for the notion that academia is separate from the public discourse and therefore not responsible to it nor for it. My peer and I had the chance to talk, and he explained that he had felt quite bad for the incident that evening, for he was intentionally trivializing my ideas to see how deep felt and passionate they really were. We shared an important understanding at that moment, for we both had been in academic situations where we appropriated the discourse of the dominant group in an attempt to better share our ideas, only to find that we had made our ideas irrelevant by adopting a mode of discourse (vernacular, etc.) that did not capture our sentiments, and more often than not simply marginalized our ideas. We both shared the same frustrations and anger (or is it passion?).

It would be easy to say that all’s well that ends well, but I think that is an incorrect sentiment at this time. For, I am stuck with the most difficult question I have come across to date: What is the price of engaging with a dominant discourse when its ideas are not necessarily representative of your own? Is this the reason academia has so much difficulty engaging and being relevant in the public sphere.