

Introduction: Texts, Power, and Pedagogy

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In April 2002, three symposia dealing with semiotics in education were held at the American Educational Research Association conference in New Orleans. This particular collection of papers results from our feeling that there was a dynamic synergy among the presenters and between the papers. The presenters engaged in a political critique interrogating educational practices and theories in the context of their particular interactions. Each presenter critiqued his or her (our) beliefs and ways of “doing” things in education and how the systems of education that we operate in inform our ways of acting. During the Semiotics in Education Special Interest Group meetings and sessions, a discussion gradually developed and extended about how we each acted in our particular sites in accordance with our differentiated agendas. We discovered that in our individual ways, we were all attempting to keep our ideas of education an open and ongoing system of signs that we could continue to build upon, while at the same time, we recognized that we had to confront programs in education that acted to systematize the field in terms of categorizing educational audiences and knowledge workers almost indifferently to their needs. In the series of discussions that developed, we continually went back, as it were, to what our stimulus was for going into education, the utopian intent of what we understood education could be, who we currently were as educators, and what educational activity had now come to mean for each of us as individuals and as colleagues working to be together.

These texts, it seemed to us all, were unified by our concerns of the variety of forms of power and constraints that we all encountered. The discussions worked to locate us as active participants in attempting to find new ways to give voice and impetus to our understandings. We believed that the discussions had an empowering effect on the authors themselves as they united us in readdressing common goals and working toward uncommon solutions.

We found it fascinating that there was not a single ethical core that we could identify as the factor that united us. Rather, what emerged was that “core” or basic values we adhered to needed to be understood as constantly subjected to reinterpretation by investing parties, and that therefore, we needed to revisit what has evolved and deliberately work at interrogating what we know. We have to constantly check if the fabula (Bal) of education,

or the premise of our textual notions, coincides with the actual pedagogical tasks that we enact in our everyday work as educators. One of the linked themes, from Lis Nielsen's paper, posits the notion of the "sensible heart." The heart, or the caring aspect, of our agenda too often becomes lost in systemic operations that work toward producing education and educators as efficient models that can operate for schools and government systems. However, we need to work with more than heart—we need to be reasoned so that we are not just efficient but can effectively maintain the ethical vision of whom the systems are actually working for and what that work means for the educators in that system.

The papers presented in this issue address the various dimensions of our thinking as educators as well as our thinking about education and who we are as actors in that system. We also invited colleagues who had not been a part of our original meeting to join us, because they share our concerns and are working consciously within the daily shifting and changing political and social agenda of educational activism.

The texts presented in this collection also link the questions of knowledge production, power, ethics, and meaning. Research communities and the academic world are obvious loci of such an intersection. Following is a brief overview of the papers in the present volume.

David Phillips's text addresses the corporate character of knowledge production within the university, which undermines the utopian potential of higher education as a critical force of democracy. Re-scribing knowledge as intellectual property, while maintaining the "ideological fantasy" of education as public good, is met with significantly weak resistance within, as well as outside, the academe. The current developments in higher education policies turn universities into agencies of transferring knowledge from public to private domains, thus alienating it from communities of knowing and turning it into a commodity that needs no human agent. Men are "dispensable," says Phillips, while knowledge *counts*.

One of the areas mentioned by Phillips, in which the operation of re-writing knowledge in terms of property rights is performed, is genetics. Nowadays not only genetic knowledge but genes themselves are subject to patent rights, privatization, and commerce. Jamie Magnusson's paper provides a fascinating example of such a tendency. It combines acute social criticism with a unique insider's perspective of a person paradoxically involved in the genomic business. It is a shocking case of scientism going beyond its extremes, displacing whole communities for genetic material. Do we really know who owns our bodies?

Linda Muzzin writes within the same agenda of academic capitalism. Her account points to the gendered and racialized character of knowledge production (e.g., "male" theory and "female" applied knowledge), to the conflict between teaching in the public domain and the increasingly globalized, corporate ownership of knowledge, and to the complicity of professional schools who sell "white, androcentric science" to the Third World in the neocolonial globalization. Her text presents detailed analyses from the field of medical and pharmaceutical education in Canada and sketches an agenda for critical resistance.

Is it possible for academic teachers to maintain themselves as “caring educators” while also operating in a highly stratified and uncaring system? This question is asked by Patricia Burdell and Linda Rogers in their paper, which, as they say, “is not a paper.” Indeed, it is far more. It brings about a challenging perspective of questioning the academic distance to what is real: to human lives and their experience. In the academy, “too much” engagement with the real is punished. It conflicts with promotion criteria, with tenure schemes, and—in general—with scientific rationality of the research community. Even though the vital question that concerns us all, asked by Rogers and Burdell, deals with educational science in particular, the ethical concern expressed here is shared with the ones discussed before: To whom are we loyal? Who do we really work for? How can we keep our ethical concern alive—with and/or against the systems we work within?

Burdell and Rogers’ text connects with two others. Lou Denti and Gill Guerin’s “Plans, Predictions, and Frustration in the Education of a Troubled Youth” goes deeply into “real life” in which the dense complexity of conditions attributing to a child’s delinquency and the measures taken (and those not taken) by judicial and educational authorities are narrated both from the objective, research-based position and from the child-centered position. Michael’s story, which is the basis of the text, adds the dimension of marginalization turned into criminality to those analyzed before.

In Lis Nielsen’s paper, the problem of “the real” re-appears in a theoretical discourse of philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive science. Nielsen’s concern is basically similar to that expressed by Burdell and Rogers—how to give voice to the real, the material, and the direct that we normally lose while turning experience into (academic) discourse. Nielsen makes recourse to Løgstrup’s radical understanding of metaphor and to the notion of the “living word” that cuts across the border between the real and the ideal. Her utopian idealism calls for another radical linguistic turn in social science—for a cautious recognition of violence done by concepts.

The paper by Szkudlarek also connects the issue of power that operates behind and through academic discourses of education with those of language and commitment. The history of academic pedagogy, presented as being linked to changing mechanisms of political control, leads to the contemporary colonization of educational thinking by economy. This leaves ethical claims, once strongly connected with the notion of *Bildung*, almost disconnected from mainstream pedagogical research. Szkudlarek concludes with a question: Are we still “doing pedagogy”? The original project of this academic field strongly advocated that instrumental knowledge serves the ethical goal. Is this still the case in academic education?

In fact, what does it mean to “do pedagogy” in the contemporary world? The collection of papers we present here seems to give this question a sharp edge. Even though they may sometimes read as almost bitterly critical, we have to bear in mind that such criticism may only stem from the lived experience of utopian idealism: from the felt experience of distance and otherness toward the world that we live in, rooted in the belief that the world *can* be different from what it currently is. And this attitude is deeply pedagogical.