

OPENING MINDS TO CHANGE THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

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DORIS LESSING OPENED HER 1985 MASSEY LECTURES WITH A RATHER STARTLING proposition: “I think when people look back at our time, they will be amazed at one thing more than any other. It is this – that we do know more about ourselves now than people did in the past. But that very little of it has been put into effect.”¹ She was speaking about the knowledge of individual and group behaviour that resides mainly in the universities and could help us improve the institutions and functioning of democracy. Ronald Edmonds, then Director of the Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University, made a similar claim when he wrote three declarative statements about the education of poor children, “(a) We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; (b) We already know more than we need to in order to do that; (c) Whether or not we do it must finally depend upon how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”² Both writers embrace research to support conclusions that reflect their personal values and commitments.

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POSITIONS ON SPECIFIC ISSUES IN EDUCATION ARE OFTEN FRAMED BY WIDELY HELD MYTHS OR MISCONCEPTIONS. IN SUCH CASES RESEARCH RARELY CHANGES PEOPLE'S MINDS

The connection between knowledge and values is at the heart of the new vision of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to “engage Canadians in building knowledge and in using that knowledge to create a just, free, prosperous and culturally vibrant world”.³ Like Lessing and Edmonds, the SSHRC Strategic Plan concludes that “we already possess or can develop the knowledge required” to reach this vision but, “Our problem is one of values, of economic and political priorities and of social organization.” Education researchers, research centres, governments, some professional organizations and school districts are engaged in vigorous efforts to make research make a difference in decision-making and in professional practice. But these efforts have to overcome some specific challenges.

The role of values and ethics in educational discourse presents a dilemma. For example, is a just society one in which public education provides for the success of all children regardless of their backgrounds or one that distributes the benefits of schooling by a system of merit? And who should decide?

Unlike medicine, education is not – and likely cannot be – rooted in scientific traditions. It lacks an explicit knowledge base that professionals rely upon. Opinion can be as powerful as evidence; personal experience more relevant than research knowledge. Indeed research findings are often rejected when they conflict with personal knowl-

edge. And the opposite is sometimes true.

I became interested in the contribution of education research to policy ideas during nine years as an elected member of the former Toronto Board of Education. We were developing a policy on ‘heritage languages’ in the schools in the absence of any provincial policy framework. The research made so much sense to me – that learning one’s first language well, including the capacity to read and write it, benefits second language learning and that the more languages one learns the easier it becomes to learn another language. It explained an observation I had made at high school graduations, that every student who left with a certificate of trilingualism had come to school with neither English nor French as a first language. But the Toronto Board’s battle for heritage languages was in the end not about whether multi-language programs were good public policy for education. It was about conflicting visions of Toronto in particular and Canada in general. It was characterized as a program for immigrants whose first language was neither English nor French – positively by the political left and negatively by the right. In the end, most educational policy debates are about value conflicts. Positions on specific issues in education are often framed by widely held myths or misconceptions. In such cases research rarely changes people’s minds.

It was not research that enabled me to grasp the concept of what Cummins now refers to as multiliteracy.⁴ It was experience. I spent a day in a multilingual school in the inner city as a contributor to a theme study on the sea. I took with me a large box of fresh seaweed collected from the coast of Nova Scotia. I pulled some long black, shiny strands from the box and asked a Grade 4 class, “What is this?” Very few hands went up, but one boy was particularly vigorous in getting my attention. As he started to speak in Portuguese, a friend pulled his hand down and said, “Shush, this is the English class”. The crest-fallen child replied, “But I don’t know this stuff in English.” And I now understood the connection between language and learning quite differently.

The tacit knowledge that each of us holds is made up of theories and concepts as well as facts, beliefs, experiences, and the relationships among all of these. Many of the most important issues in education pose fundamental conceptual problems. Academics deal with conceptual problems by theorizing. Valuable as this activity is, their work often remains inaccessible or unsought by decision-makers and practitioners. And so it is unknown to the general public. Consider the following abstract:

This article argues that information literacy, as represented in the professional literature is positivist in epistemological orientation and incompatible with concepts of knowledge from digital and online environments. The paper reviews definitions of “information literacy,” and argues that assumptions of the information literacy framework are at variance with the knowledges and learnings that occur in many homes and schools today. Hence, the potential to dismantle school library logics and cultures, as they are currently understood and enacted, lies not



with technology *per se*, but with the disjunctions and dissonances between traditional library practices and the new social conditions, textualities, and literacies emerging within a context of increasing economic and cultural globalization.”⁵

What would a school librarian, principal or superintendent make of this?

The ways that academics go about developing and testing theories or hypotheses are not necessarily the ways that the rest of us use and their language is unfamiliar to many outside of the ivory tower. Yet academic theorizing seems to me to offer a critical perspective on many of the problems in education in an era of rapid change when both social and economic imperatives demand better learning. Approaches to making research that re-frames important concepts (for example: intelligence, learning, literacy, mathematical literacy) more relevant to educational change makers must take account of the fact that to replace old concepts with new ones requires that people change their minds. Most of us add new information to what we already know. But what do we do when new knowledge contradicts what people think they know; when their ideas rest on faulty assumptions or inadequate theories?

Charles Handy, in a short essay on the future of organizations wrote, “Our use of old words to describe new things can often hide the emerging future from our eyes.”⁶ But it is equally true that the use of new words to describe essentially old things also obscures. The education domain frequently adopts the language of theoreticians – for example multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, multi-literacies, learning communities – to describe human qualities or aspects of human learning that are intrinsically old, as old as the human species itself. These words, representing new constructs or concepts, could help illuminate the mismatch between how humans learn and how we organize for learning in school. But all too often, the new words become grafted on to old ideas. They get turned into policies and programs and risk becoming yet another educational fad or failing to make the intended difference. Yet fundamentally they are new ideas that challenge old ones. They are ways of thinking about something rather than ways of doing something.

Think about ‘life-long learning’. I assumed its intended purpose was to crystallize the idea that learning, the same as breathing, occurs from birth to death and in all settings that we inhabit. If life-long learning is different from adult learning, or adult education, then why do we talk of children as ‘becoming life long learners’? Why are they not already life-long learners? This is not simply a matter of semantics. What we understand as the underlying concept will have significant bearing on what possibilities that concept suggests in both policy and practice.

It is a widely held belief that the world has changed. Analysts disagree about the impacts of economic globalization driven largely by technological innovation, but many accept that the 21st century requires new skills to be widely available – critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and flexibility of mind with communicative and technological competence. Above all, we need to be expert learners throughout our lives. Since many school leavers lack these attributes, where do we look for an understanding of the challenges and for better ideas about schooling?

EN BREF L'éducation nécessite la création, le transfert et la diffusion de savoir. Dans le milieu de l'éducation, toutefois, les liens entre ces fonctions sont maintenant dysfonctionnels. Nous savons déjà ce que nous devons savoir pour garantir le succès de nos enfants. Cependant, les intellectuels qui conçoivent des théories et des hypothèses n'arrivent pas à influencer les décideurs publics qui, eux, ont peu d'influence sur les enseignants. Conséquemment, le fossé se creuse entre ce que nous savons sur l'apprentissage et ce que nous faisons de ce savoir. Ce fossé résulte en partie de différences fondamentales entre la tour d'ivoire et la salle de classe et du fait que de nouvelles connaissances concurrencent souvent des connaissances existantes construites sur des bases théoriques inadéquates. Il est essentiel d'établir le dialogue entre les universités et les membres de la profession afin que nos connaissances sur l'apprentissage préparent adéquatement les jeunes pour le 21^e siècle.

This magazine, Education Canada, is one place to start. It creates a relationship between the writer and reader that mediates a gulf between academic and professional knowledge. Through its pages many academics have been able to share their critiques of current theories and concepts in the language of policy and practice. Consider a few examples:

... we need to think more deeply about the growing gap between the lives children and youth lead outside school and the ones that are available to them within its walls. And when we do this, we have to acknowledge the simple fact that computers have been in schools for more than twenty years. Educators persist in thinking of them as new, but an entire generation of teachers has already had access to them. They are just not using the technology the way kids are using it outside of school. — Pat Clifford (*Spring 2005 Vol. 45, No. 2.*)

The absence of serious policy consideration to address linguistic diversity at all levels of the educational system has resulted in the “normalization” of some highly problematic assumptions and practices that risk compromising Canadian schools’ commitment to equity. — Jim Cummins. (*Spring 2006 Vol.46, No.2.*)

Knowledge Building brings students’ conceptions out into the open and enlists students themselves in criticizing and revising them. And we have shown that students have no fear of the abstract. Even the youngest students delight in producing and working with ideas. Kids are more than ready for the Knowledge Age. The question is, are we? — Marlene Scadamalia and Carl Bereiter. (*Fall 2003 Vol. 43, No.4.*)

I believe that our greatest problem is a theoretical confusion at the heart of our enterprise, and that most educational research and theorizing today pass educational practice by. — Kieran Egan. (*Spring 2003. Vol.43, No.2.*)

Theoretical and conceptual confusions in education are multiple and fundamental. They are about the purposes of schooling, the nature of intelligence, concepts of childhood and human development, about curriculum, and the nature of literacy. While conceptual confusion in public education is always to be expected to some degree, it seems to me to be a larger problem at this time.

Ronald Manzer, professor emeritus of political science, who spent his academic life in the study of public policy for education, offers one way of better understanding this phenomenon. He explains that public education in Canada is rooted firmly in a liberal political ideology that changes over time. Manzer argues that beginning in the 1990s we



have seen the emergence of a “technological liberalism” whereby the “educational project” is one in which the overriding determinant of political, social and economic life is the emergence of a global economy. Ruthless competition and technological development require that all students acquire a solid basic knowledge and skills to equip them for life-long learning. They must be scientific and technologically capable in order to take their places in “technologically advanced societies”. Standards are not to be determined by needs for personal fulfillment but against the outcomes of Canada’s major competitors.⁷

Manzer calls for “the public dialogue and principled consensus that have potential to constitute a public philosophy of education in Canada”. Dialogue is a particular form of conversation that explores differences of perspective, assumptions and values. So we need new dialogues for two reasons – to remake a public philosophy of education that most can support and to allow both the public and the profession to wrestle with faulty concepts that no longer support our aspirations for all students.

Changing people’s minds often takes more than talk or even dialogue. It requires that we re-frame issues to create a different lens through which to view a subject. And as John Seely Brown observes sometimes you have to show people, “It’s never enough to just tell people about some new insight. Rather, you have to get them to experience it in a way that evokes its power and possibility.”⁸ This is why story-telling plays such an important role in human understanding and why a performance or a video may be more powerful than a lecture. If research informs these broader

efforts in the public, professional and political domains we stand a better chance of using it to make a difference to the decisions we make and the actions we take on behalf of society’s children. |

PENNY MILTON is CEO of the Canadian Education Association. This article is adapted from a presentation at a conference on *The Future of Life-Long Learning and Work*, OISE/UT, May 2005.

Notes

- 1 Doris Lessing, “The Prisons We Choose to Live Inside,” 1985 Massey Lectures (House of Anansi Press, 1987).
- 2 Ronald Edmonds, “Effective Schools for the Urban Poor,” *Educational Leadership* (October 197): 23.
- 3 SSHRC, Knowledge Council: SSHRC Strategic Plan 2006-2011. http://www.sshrc.ca/web/about/publications/strategic_plan_e.pdf
- 4 Jim Cummins, “Multiliteracies and Equity: How do Canadian Schools Measure Up?” *Education Canada* 45, no. 2 (2006): 4-7.
- 5 Cushla Kapitzke, “Information Literacy: A Positivist Epistemology and a Politics of Outformation,” *Educational Theory on the Web* 53, no. 1 (2003). Accessed 11/12/2006 http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/Educational-Theory/Contents/2003_1.htm
- 6 Charles Handy, “The Corporate Citizen,” *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1997: 26-30.
- 7 Ronald Manzer, *Public Schools and Political Ideas: Canadian Educational Policy in Historical Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 266-267.
- 8 John Seely Brown, “Research That Reinvents the Corporation. The Innovative Enterprise,” *Harvard Business Review* (August, 2002): 105-115.



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