

CHAPTER 1

A 'BIOGRAPHICAL POSITIONING'

As researchers we all have an individual trajectory which shapes the research we do, the questions we ask and the way we do it. But as researchers we are also socio-culturally located, we have a social autobiography, and this has an equally if not more important part to play in shaping our research and directing the kinds of reflexive questions which need to be asked but rarely are. (Usher 1996: 32)

Some thirty years ago I was attending the first meeting of a group embarking on an MA programme in Ethics under Robert Dearden's guidance at the London Institute of Education. Dearden began by reminding us of the question which was to be the focus of our discussion and then invited the first contribution on the issue. An Australian woman cleared her throat and appeared to be in some state of agitation. Dearden turned to her expectantly.

'Excuse me,' she intervened, nervously but with some determination, 'but do you think we might begin by introducing ourselves, so that we know a little about each other? Otherwise we're just, well...'

'...just sources of argument?' offered Dearden.

'Yes.'

'Well, that's exactly what you are here – sources of argument. It does not matter who you are or where you come from. What matters is the quality of your argument. If you want to know more about each other then you can meet in the pub afterwards. Now, on virtue...'

Similarly, perhaps, when John Russell asked the painter Balthus for some biographical details for a catalogue in 1968, the artist cabled him back, abruptly: 'Balthus is a painter about whom nothing is known. Now, let us look at the pictures. Regards. B.' (The Times, 19th February 2001: 21)

Those who approach this book from a background in analytic philosophy or with Balthus's preference to focus on the product rather than the person will properly skip this quasi biographical chapter and get to the argument. I have some sympathy for this approach and indeed for what is in many ways the very emancipatory requirement which Dearden imposed on his seminar¹: address the argument, not the person; judge the validity of the view presented by reference to the strength of the argument adduced in its support and not by reference to the authority, standing, unpleasantness, charm, kinship, race, gender or sexuality of the person who is its source. These are principles which I continue to hold as fundamental in the

¹ I refer to it as 'emancipatory' because, in principle at least, (i) it makes no requirements on the social status of contributors only on the epistemological status of what they have to say, and (ii) it de-personalises criticism, which is addressed to the argument and not against the person.

conversations of the academic community – and I shall be very content if the argument which follows in this collection of essays can be approached on this basis.

There is however a different tradition in contemporary educational research which argues that the attempt to render the writer invisible in the text, the effacing of the narrative which lies behind the text and which is (on this view) inevitably entangled with it, is an artifice which is doomed to fail. The researcher's subjectivity is, in Peshkin's phrase, 'a garment which cannot be removed' (Peshkin 1988: 17. See also Peshkin 1982 and Cheater 1987). Not only that, but such artificial self-effacement is actually an obstacle to others' proper understanding of what is being said and evaluation of its merits. What we choose to say and how we say it does not after all come from out of the blue. If it has any integrity it is rooted in our life histories, our values and our deepest beliefs and in the social context of our writing. 'Who a researcher is is central to what a researcher does' (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001: 13). Rather than obscure these connections we can help the reader by rendering them explicit. 'Biographical positioning,' writes Atkinson, 'forms an important part of interpretative enquiry in a post-modern frame' (Atkinson 2000 but see also Richardson 1992, Sparkes 1994, Packwood and Sikes 1996), though I do not I think have to swallow the whole postmodernist project in order to come to the same opinion.

Since I am hoping in this book to address an eclectic research readership I shall defer to this expectation and offer a brief account of what lies behind this collection of thoughts. It may have an additional interest as evidence towards an empirical sociology of educational research knowledge. Besides, it helps me to make some sort of sense of what might otherwise be assumed to be some erratic wanderings. As MacLure (1993) observed: 'People use (biographical accounts) to make sense of themselves and their actions – to find order and consistency in the journey from past to present; to work out where they 'stand' in relation to others; to defend their attitudes and conduct' (p. 320). I do this, however, with the clear acknowledgement and warning that this is, and must be of course, highly selective. 'In telling our lives, or those of others, we must select; we must conceal in order to reveal' (MacLure and Stronach 1989: 11). It is a story – a storying – among many that might have been told. And though it is hardly startling in its self-revelation, my colleagues whose commitment to de-personalised argument has not suffered the same corruption that mine has, through promiscuous association with narrativists, phenomenologists, ethnographers, psycho-dynamicists and the like, should move speedily and without embarrassment to the next chapter.

My first encounters with philosophy came when, as a history undergraduate at Oxford, I took a course in the history of ideas. I recall, for example, Isaiah Berlin explaining that there were seventeen interpretations of Macchiavelli's Prince and being impressed that by the end of a lecture in which he appeared never to take his

eye off a plaster decoration on the ceiling he had indeed covered exactly seventeen. As a history student I was already developing some interest in what I now recognise as issues in the philosophy of history. I remember arranging a seminar for my college historical society on the historical novel, which was possibly the source of the interest which is reflected many years later in chapter eight. I had come to Oxford from a working class family (though we were not actually very self-conscious about that), none of whom had stayed on at school beyond fourteen. My parents were heavily involved in the local Labour Party (an unpromising cause in Leamington Spa) but theirs was a very humble, gradualist brand of socialism and I was more than a little daunted by the upper middle class Marxists whom I encountered at Oxford. I was nevertheless prompted to write my first essay on education while I was there in a Christian Socialist tract on education: a detailed argument in support of the then relatively novel idea of comprehensive schooling. Re-reading this recently I was both alarmed and comforted to find how little my views had changed over these forty years.

I went from Oxford to the London Institute of Education for my teacher education (this was only later to become teacher training), but though Richard Peters was already regaling the massed ranks in the Beveridge Hall with his careful analysis of the concept of education, it was Bernstein's incisive and colourful analysis of language and social class, the sweeping scope of Lowrys's lectures in comparative education and my history tutor, Jim Henderson's, idiosyncratic Jungian approach to the teaching of history and to education and international understanding which I found intellectually stimulating at that stage². Jim Henderson's teaching, friendship and encouragement led me into some of my early experience in curriculum development – developing and teaching multi-disciplinary programmes in World Studies, Peace Education and 'Conflict' in the mid sixties and to my first editorial role with *New Era*, the long established mouthpiece of progressive education, to which I felt that I subscribed. I was joined in this role by Michael Fielding with whom I shared then and later, as we both developed our philosophical interests, values to do with student centred learning, communitarianism, responsible anarchism and internationalism.

I had only been teaching for three years – a very happy experience which provoked in me, nevertheless, some increasingly searching questions about educational purposes and practice – when an opportunity arose for me to take an advanced course in education. Tony Morris, the head of history at Blackdown High School, where I had done my pre-PGCE teaching experience, had been studying for a Diploma in Philosophy at the London Institute of Education and every time I met him he drew me into what seemed at the time to be intensely interesting debates which he was enjoying on the course at the Institute – and this was the course on which I subsequently enrolled. When Richard Peters responded to one student invocation of Plato 'Yes, that is what Plato said – but was he right?' I began to

² For a more extended recollection of this period at the London Institute of Education see my lecture in celebration of fifty years of Philosophy of Education at the London Institute of Education (Bridges 1998a).



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