

Chapter 2

The Social Turn – From Up Close and Personal

Peter Winbourne

My aim in this chapter is to provide something of a map of the history of the social turn, as seen from up close in Steve's thinking and writing, and reflected in his practice.

So, there is, I hope, a double loop to be found here: how Steve's writing has been an articulation of sociocultural approaches; how it has also been a reflection of sociocultural approaches to be seen in his practice.

Methodology

Writing a chapter in a book of this kind about Steve's example, obliges me to include some methodological discussion. I would like to say that this has been a longitudinal ethnographic study with Steve, and the academic and professional communities within which he has been working, as subject. Had a claim like this been at all justified, the study would certainly have been longitudinal: I have been working with Steve as a very close colleague, and friend, for 19 years. But, how close is close? For a number of years Steve and I shared an office. That office also served as a changing room and a place for me to keep my sweaty cycle gear, and also, quite regularly, as a place for Steve to keep his running gear on the days he chose to run home. For most of that time there was a pot of poisonously strong coffee always on the brew, and, though it is now some 13 years since we have had our own offices, the smell and taste linger. For the past 3 years we have been housed in a brand new building. Steve's office and mine are two doors away. I pass his door everyday as I arrive (usually after changing out of my cycling gear in the nice new changing room on the same floor). Most often he is there before me. When he is

P. Winbourne (✉)
London South Bank University, London, UK
e-mail: winboupc@lsbu.ac.uk

there, I almost always knock, and go in and we have a chat. The thing about this is that Steve always seems pleased to see me, even though I will often have called in to ask advice, evince feelings, grumble; this does not happen only on arrival.

We often eat together, particularly when at conferences like PME – The International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education (<http://www.igpme.org/>) – to which, needless to say, Steve introduced me – and the many residential weekends he or I organise for our courses. And, of course, we often teach together. Very often our students get our names mixed up, and this makes us laugh. We write together less often, I think, than either he or I might have hoped, but we do write together. As we approach the end of our careers at our University, we are resolved to stay in touch and, at the very least, meet regularly for lunch. I don't recall a single argument.

But, of course, whilst I would like to think I have been learning from Steve all this time, I have not been studying him; I have, however, found myself doing this as I have prepared this chapter, and I should say how.

For the first time in our long association I interviewed Steve. Twice. Formally. Each for about an hour. Well, I say formally; they were meant to be formal, but the interviews could not, perhaps, but be fairly typical of our relationship, and many of our conversations: interrupted by phone calls (I think this was when Steve was finally buying a new car), me being late, colleagues knocking on his door. The first interview was semi-structured – I had an agenda: charting the social turn in Steve's writing and practice; the second, a week later, represented an hermeneutic revisiting of the first, in so far as we used the transcript of that first interview to structure our discussion. Looking back, I thought I had seen plenty of evidence over the years of the 'social' in Steve's practice, but I wanted to make sense of the idea that this might have some kind of connection to his thinking and writing. I have taken a few liberties with the transcripts of our interviews, but, after showing these to Steve, I am confident I have been true to what we meant. As usual, omissions are shown by dots (...) and additions by square brackets []. All extracts are in italics.

These interviews were conversations between old colleagues and friends, the most subjective of research, and there would have been shared meanings, nuances which, whilst not made explicit here, were clearly there. But at this point, I remind myself that, some time back, a few years after I had been working with Steve, I realised, and I think I am right, that when Steve was writing, he was writing for an audience a large number of whom were, or would, or could become his friends. Given that sociocultural theory is at the heart of Steve's work, this book, and this chapter (and my work), I think that this is relevant. By making this point, I do not mean to detract from the value of Steve's writing, or sociocultural theorizing and research. It is, after all, the relatively recent acceptance in our community of claims that all thinking is essentially social in nature, in which Steve has played no small part, which has legitimized my writing this chapter.

So, the 'data' to which I refer here, and my reading and interpretation of our formal interview conversations, are unashamedly the result of filtering through many shared experiences, and friendship and affection, including feelings I have

come to see as those I might have towards a ‘big brother’ (I have a big brother and I love him, but I have sometimes found myself looking to Steve as if he were a big brother); wanting to live up to him; not wanting to disappoint. I have, after all, worked with him for half of my professional life; and he has been stuck with me for nearly as large a proportion of his.

In this chapter, I have aimed to avoid too much sentimental interpretation. I have used extracts from these interviews as the bulk of the text, letting them, for the most part, do the talking (though I have added commentary in places). I have organized the extracts using a loose structure based on a rough and ready distinction between two ‘phases’: before Steve’s PhD and after his PhD (without worrying too much about the boundary between them).

In each phase extracts from our interviews are arranged to map the social turn in Steve’s writing, and the social turn as it seems to be reflected in his practice. I have aimed to produce some kind of narrative, if only to help with reading, but it is doubtful that any apparent coherence is justified, given what we know about the messiness of our human experience.

‘Coming home’ is a phrase that surfaced in our minds in the first interview, and I like it very much; we found ourselves using it to describe Steve’s (and my) feelings about the process of moving towards sociocultural theory from the starchy, bourgeois individualism of constructivism. Coming home, I think, is a thread running through both phases.

Before the PhD – Steve’s Early Teaching

What Steve says about his early teaching career suggests a trajectory – coming home – that would inevitably, I think, arc towards a socio-cultural perspective.

I think that what I have seen over the years I have been working with him has been a bit like Steve’s self-explication of the theoretical basis for his practice.

Steve had encountered new maths when teaching in Israel (1970–1973). In this extract Steve refers to SMILE – (Secondary Mathematics Individualised Learning Experiment) and SMP (School Mathematics Project) and I need to set some historical and political context.

SMILE was initially developed as a series of practical activities for secondary school students by practising teachers in the 1970s (National STEM Centre 2012). I was ‘brought up’ from the seventies in ILEA as a SMILE teacher in London comprehensive schools. The Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) was at the single education authority for London, established by the new Greater London Council (GLC) in 1965. From 1967 to 1981 the ILEA and GLC were under the Control of the Conservative party. In 1981, with Margaret Thatcher firmly established as Prime Minister, Labour won control of GLC and ILEA. ILEA continued to be seen by many, including Thatcher, as a powerful opposition force

that got in the way of Conservative plans for devolution of responsibility for education and the establishment of an educational market. The GLC was abolished in 1986, the ILEA in 1990.

The School Mathematics Project (SMP 2012) materials included individual work cards used mainly by lower secondary children. Some teachers were involved in the development of these materials, but they were much more of a ‘product’ to be bought than SMILE which was more a project to be “bought into”.

Much of my own professional development as a schoolteacher took the form of active participation in the development of SMILE within this political context, attending workshops and conferences, etc. Steve knew this, of course.

Steve: When I took over as Head of Maths in 1975 back in England I was very keen to go ... for the new Maths. I liked individualised learning. I did not encounter SMILE at all but I did encounter SMP the individual learning and went for that. [...] I had a kind of fairly traditional view that if you can excite [children] about mathematics, ... if you can explain things well enough and when you realise you are not explaining well enough let them explain to each other rather than try to say it yet again; aside from that I think my teaching was probably fairly traditional. I cared a lot about kids because I had been a youth leader before then. ... as a form teacher, I was also their Maths teacher ... We talked about all sorts of stuff that the Church of England school would not have been happy about had they known, about drugs and about religions and all sorts of things like that. And I guess that overlapped a little into my teaching too, there was an awful lot of caring that people did not understand. I never accepted – I never really – I didn't think it through particularly, but I don't think I ever thought that ability is something that is set: anybody can learn mathematics if they get the right support and enthusiasm and interest.

Steve had encountered Wittgenstein, whose work has been a powerful influence on his thinking, in the late 70's, at the start of his PhD.

Steve: the early Wittgenstein I had encountered but not the later Wittgenstein, of course the later Wittgenstein was the really inspiring one. I would have to say that there was nothing articulated [in my writing]. If anyone had interviewed me to say 'what is your philosophy of teaching?' well, I could have rambled on a bit but philosophy of teaching mathematics specifically, I wouldn't [have added] any coherent thought through [reference to] philosophy.

The Constructivist

The first work of Steve's I came across was ‘Constructivism, mathematics and mathematics education’ (Lerman 1989 – This publication date is after Steve's PhD, but the work is the product of PhD and pre-PhD thinking). His stance appeared,

well, constructivist. His concern in that paper had been to explore the connection between the word ‘constructivism’ in foundations of mathematics and constructivism in radical constructivism.

Steve: *[In that paper I was] just speculating on what the links were between the two but I mean I have not looked at that paper for years but if I remember correctly in that paper I did talk about my concerns about the private languages issue of Wittgenstein that I had encountered.*

Peter: *In my masters dissertation that I wrote .. in 1990 ... I saw the work that you were doing as radical constructivism, would that be a reasonable?*

Steve: *Absolutely. I was somewhat confused at that stage because already in my PhD thesis I had taken a radical constructivist stance in kind of 1985 but by the time I completed it in 1986 I had encountered the later Wittgenstein. [Radical constructivism] formed a crucial part of my thesis and I had some severe doubts about [it] because of the private language issue. I just couldn't go with it. Now, in 1987 Summer I went to PME in Canada, Montréal, which goes down in history as the radical constructivist PME because Ernst Von Glasersfeld should have been giving a plenary and he was not. Instead Jeremy Kilpatrick was given the plenary to speak about radical constructivism and he was not a radical constructivist. And so the radical constructivists – Jere Confrey, and Paul Cobb, and all the others – were absolutely furious and I identified with them because it was kind of the radical younger group, if you like, and I have always, you know kind of drifted towards radical younger groups. So even though I had my reservations and even [though] we discussed those reservations I had in terms of private languages and so on, nevertheless I kind of identified with them in spirit if not in the letter of the theory. So 1987 was when I wrote that article but by the time it was out I was already. ... I had already even encountered Vygotsky which pulled me away from radical constructivism completely.*

After the PhD

Peter: *During the 10⁺-year period (1987–2000) ... I wouldn't say that ideas [become] crystallised but you are clearly not radical constructivist. You are looking at sociocultural perspectives which you describe as a social turn, and I suppose, yes, people like me are looking to you to kind of champion the social turn at places like PME.*

Steve: *Well that certainly happened. ... There had been a number of PME papers which were sorting out some of these ideas in 1991, 1992, 1993 those kind of years. I went to a Conference in Russia in 1993 and met Vygotsky's daughter would you believe. ... Leontiev's son [was there] – and you know Activity Theory – and it was just really exciting, and I was learning and reading; it was really an interesting, exciting time looking back on it, reading all this stuff. So the ideas had been emerging certainly and I thought that America was the heartland of radical constructivism and so to engage people in debate I had to try and get something in JRME and so I started in 1994 and it took a while because JRME bounces articles back three or four times. But it eventually went in. (Lerman 1996)*

Coming Home

About 10 years ago, partly because Steve was not always in the country, partly for my own good, I began to substitute for him, occasionally giving his lectures. As always, Steve was generous with his ideas and support, and very tolerant of my not always impressive efforts. I had been pushing Steve to talk about his huge influence on the Mathematics Education community. His response was characteristic.

Steve: Look as you know I am a fairly modest person I think the Social Turn chapter I wrote for Jo's book (Lerman 2000) was a chance to bring together everything that I knew, and that is what it did for me, right. It has turned out – and I could not have known at the time – that for other people it clarified all sorts [of things] and a lot of people... I mean even [at] the Conference I went to just last week, a young woman came up to me and said 'I have to tell you that your work just transformed my thinking', and so on. And she is talking about that chapter, and it is not like I was coming up with anything particularly new there, I was putting together all sorts of things from other people and from my own work and so on, putting it all together in one, but it just seems to have been the right time for something like that and put in the right way so that people came to – people who were struggling with ideas found a lot of it there, explained for them.

Peter: Yes and from my point of view, in my privileged position working closely with you over that time, I suppose I would like to think that I had benefited from that both in our practice, where we talked about things, but also in terms of the development of my own understanding. I mean having to reproduce lectures that I know that you knew for example and eventually encouraging me to go and read this stuff which I think is quite difficult... Anyway...there was one other strand of questioning that had occurred to me as I prepared [for] this [interview] and maybe we should talk about which is that sense, I don't know whether you experience it, a feeling of coming to sociocultural theory as a bit like coming home.

Steve: Absolutely very much so. That is the best way of putting it actually.

Peter: And for you and me it is partly that because the point that you emphasise when you talk about Vygotsky's cultural milieu, the fact that he was coming out of the ghetto, exposed to all of these things; and of course where did you and I come from? And I do not know if you feel closer to those roots than I do – I suspect you do because of what I know about aspects of your Jewish identity – and I don't know if we want to bring that into this... .

Steve: It is certainly relevant for me. I don't think there is any doubt about it and, you know, when planning the talks about theories of learning I love the fact that I am using a sociocultural approach in setting out how Piaget and Vygotsky came to their ideas and part of that is the recognition of Vygotsky, language, Hebrew and Russian and so on. He knew just how important they were to his understanding about the world, so it was a small step from there to sociocultural, socio-historical theories. And Piaget's world was so different, and yes it is a bit like coming home for sure.

In our second interview, we returned to the 'coming home' metaphor. I had the feeling that we might go further, suggesting that... .

Peter: there might have been more than a feeling of coming home; perhaps we could see the appeal of the sociocultural perspective as intellectual, certainly, but maybe

we should acknowledge that it is also cultural; [is there] not a kind of affective or social pull in it as well?

Steve: I am happy to accept that; yes, absolutely. I found an excitement about Vygotsky's ideas and part and parcel of that was his same personal history as my own; I mean, not quite of course, 50 years before, 60 years before, yeah 50 years before roughly, but nevertheless in terms of an awareness of the difference, the different world-view that one takes because of that Jewish history, that history of anti-Semitism, of Jewish humour, of that Jewish consciousness, never quite being sure that everything is all right, all those kinds of things. I think it was undoubtedly a part of the excitement of coming across his ideas.

Peter: Because I am not sure of how much I know [about] Piaget, I mean I certainly don't know if he ever enjoyed Jewish jokes or told them or if that is appropriate. But there's an alien-ness for me of that perspective that does not fit ... the way Vygotsky does and it is not ... just the intellectual attraction of the theory, but the fact that with it comes the acknowledgement, tacitly perhaps, of all these other factors. Have you thought of it that way before, this way I mean?

Steve: Yes, yes for sure, if you had asked me this question 10 years ago I would have answered in the same way.

I think that Steve was not only turning towards the social, coming home, but also in quite a strong sense turning away from what he experienced more and more as a sterile constructivism, sterile because it ignored the role of language and mediation. A perspective that could not accommodate or even recognize the work of Wittgenstein, particularly his later work on language (Wittgenstein 1968) – hugely influential in Steve's thinking since his masters in Logic and the Philosophy of Science – was bound to be rejected at some time.

Steve realised as we talked that, whilst he had clearly articulated in his lectures to students the pull he felt towards sociocultural theory (and, I think, the perception of constructivism as 'other'), he had never actually written it down.

Steve: I mean where I have written you know looking at constructivism and socio-cultural theory I have not drawn attention to the personal identification I feel, yeah the personal identification I feel with Vygotsky, I suppose; certainly his ideas ring true to me, not just because they seem to describe the learning experience in a much more appropriate, much richer way than the kind of constructivist theories, but also in more of a Jewish way really I think.

What this shows is an interesting difference between Steve's theorising and practice (though the practice here is the practice of teaching about theory). What Steve, the person-in-practice-in-person (Lerman 2000) is prepared to say to his students, and the way that he says it, comes out of his thinking, theorising, and writing, but has not made it back into his writing – not yet, anyway; this aspect of the person-in-practice-in-person, I realise, has always been there for those working with Steve to see, in conversations between old friends and colleagues, and now, I hope, in this chapter.

Having made this link from Steve's thinking, theorising, and writing to his practice, I turn to a discussion of aspects of Steve's practice to conclude the chapter.

The Social Turn in Practice

Explicit evidence of the social turn is not so easy to come by in Steve's 'post-PhD' practice, but given our description of his theoretical journey as 'coming home', this should not be so surprising. After all, the distinction between theory and practice is acknowledged as, to say the least, problematic (Frade 2004, 2005). We have looked for evidence, and I think we found it.

Peter: If now we look at your practice in those [post-PhD] years and the particular things that you were doing ... I remember ... some particular work with B.Ed students, you know the project I am talking about?

Steve: Yes... it was about the student teachers trying out a bit of research in their classroom, to get them engaged in teacher research because I was very interested in teacher research at the time [Lerman 1990]. I founded the PME working group on teacher research. So yeah it was about teacher knowledge rather than mathematical knowledge, although some of it was about teachers' knowledge [in the context of] their mathematics course. You are asking whether that kind of links with the social turn?

Peter: Yes I want to put it in that context because I was thinking about perspectives that were guiding you at the time... [When] you look back on [that activity], do you think of yourself doing that research as somebody ... doing it from the kind of sociocultural perspective that I would think of you as having now?

Steve: Yes not a fully articulated sociocultural perspective in terms of how it affected my teaching. I was busy working on the theory and the ideas, but I would not be able to say that I had, I mean looking back on it I suppose I could ... re-interpret it as playing around with development ideas, in pulling people forward in their knowledge by setting up activities and situations that would lead them to start from where they were and challenge themselves by the experiences they were encountering and the experiences of other students; but, I don't know, I don't think it was fully articulated then.

Peter: So the kind of contradiction to which you draw attention in your JRME paper (Lerman 1996) that is you cannot consistently hold both constructivist and sociocultural views, that would not have been there or you were kind of working towards that?

Steve: Yes I think you would have to say I was working towards that. The B.Ed [course] had gone by 1997. Yeah, I was working towards that. I had not brought together practice and the theory in an articulated way, but certainly in terms of general sociocultural theory I would say that was very much in my practice, in our practice.

Peter: Well I would hope so and if I recollect it – I mean at that time we are talking about I would be flattering myself to say I was struggling with the idea of sociocultural theory because I don't think I had read much, but since then I have and I can see what you were doing, at least in that sort of direction.

In our second interview, Steve offered a useful distinction as we continued to discuss what connection there might be between his developing ideas of the social turn and his own practice.

Steve: There are two elements, of course, just like SMK and PCK [Subject Matter Knowledge, Pedagogic Content Knowledge. See Shulman 1986b; Shulman 1986a] you know, in the work that we do as teachers in the University, working with student teachers or in-service teachers. You can talk about what influence

your ideas have on the stuff you choose to do, . . . and you can also separately, or in a kind of overlapping way talk about the influence of those ideas on the way that you interact with students, the kind of pedagogy side; I think the first is easier to talk about than the second because, as we know, there is no direct connection between theory and, you know, teaching practices – in that under any perspective lecturing has a place, or explaining has a place, group work has a place, people struggling with ideas on their own has a place, and so on – and you just interpret it in different ways. So I could say, well I always work with groups and people can say ‘well, that’s constructivist, what has that got to do with Vygotsky?’ and so on. So I think it is easier to talk about the first than the second I don’t think there is any doubt that, you know when you are looking [at current issues in research in mathematics education]. . . , as we did in the early days of working on the Masters course when it was an MSc in Maths Ed, . . . what one talks about are the things one is interested in. If I talk about research methods I talk about research methods that are related to the kind of research you would do from a sociocultural perspective, and all the learning theory stuff that we do is meant to be an overview; but I don’t hide the fact that I have my own preference, my own point of view; . . . in fact give a kind of socio-cultural interpretation of learning theories. . . . what I am saying is, you know, it is not difficult for me to say how I conceive of my pedagogy in sociocultural terms, [but] what I am suggesting is that anybody reading it could say ‘well, why is it sociocultural,?’ That is all I mean.

Peter: . . . [you] are not just saying, presumably, ‘Oh, I will teach in this way because it is a good idea’, you are saying this is how people learn. . .

Steve: Yeah, I suppose what I would answer is [that] I can describe what I do as working in the zone of proximal development, or I can describe what I do in terms of mediation, and I think about what I plan to do in those terms as well, whereas in earlier more naive days, I might have said ‘well, I am going to let people construct these ideas for themselves’.

It seems to me that Steve’s practice has always been at least consistent with sociocultural perspectives; if there is any power in the metaphor of ‘coming home’, then we might well expect to see tacit evidence of this in his practice even before its articulation; perhaps we might best see the relationship between Steve’s practice and his theorising and research in terms of a process of construal, making sense of dispositions to work with students in certain ways that owe something significant to a cultural milieu, happily less threatening, but not so far removed from that into which Vygotsky was born.

Looking back at the development of Education courses within our University, Steve’s evolving perspective has clearly informed his own contribution to this activity, but it also, to use the language of activity theory, has become a powerful mediating artefact within that activity. It directly influenced those of his colleagues who, like me, were working away at course development; just as formatively as the funding opportunities and policy drivers coming from government agencies, it shifted the object of our activity to include, quite explicitly, ways of working with course participants made possible, I think, only by the adoption of the kind of sociocultural perspective Steve has been articulating. I think there is more evidence of this in our second interview.

Steve: ... like our school-based MA, the EdD [I set up six years ago] was ... kind of a policy development. Other universities were offering EdDs. It looked like a great opportunity to get people working together on higher level thinking, doctoral level thinking which sounded very exciting, and it was both an expansion of courses that the Department offers and an opportunity for a new kind of teaching which was really a continuation of the Masters programme, I suppose, at a higher level. So it was kind of policy and new initiative and income and development and so on, portfolio development, that drove it; but I think, having just said what I have just said, ... it is clear that part of our thinking also was [to do with] what we have done very successfully on the Masters course: people in practice are talking about their practice and researching their practice and thinking about what researching your practice might actually mean and accessing what literature there is around in a much deeper way, but very much the same kind of thing; people working in groups, sharing their experiences. Social turn, yeah I mean it is part and parcel of it, I don't know.

Peter: I suppose we might ask if had you not taken the social turn you could imagine the EdD developing [and in] that way.

Steve: An EdD developing I am sure. I think it is highly likely because, as I say, it was driven as much by policy, local and national policy, as anything else ... but perhaps it would have been harder to conceive of the value of a course structured such that people share their experience with each other and pull each other's learning along ... I guess I would not have conceived of it in the same sort of way.

Steve was being typically modest here. What those of us working with him have been fortunate enough to have presented to us – and may sometimes have taken for granted – as part of the intellectual and collegial air we breathe, infused with a richness and depth of understanding of ‘the social’ in teaching and learning, others have had to take from their reading of his papers (though Steve has made this easy for them, of course). Steve’s chapter in Jo Boaler’s book (Lerman 2000) has clearly provided pivotal insights for many around the world; it did for us too, but less dramatically. Steve’s unit of analysis ‘person-in-practice-in-person’ (ibid, p. 38) is helpful here; closeness to Steve has, I hope, allowed us every day to brush up against and learn from this lovely ‘person-in-practice-in-person’.

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