
Images of teachers at conferences: Developing teaching as a profession, demographics and life long learning

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Abstract

Ironically, in an era of life long learning a number of countries face a teacher shortage, recruiting and retaining staff in a profession that is not seen as particularly attractive. At times teachers have been the recipients of the 'discourses of derision' and 'teacher bashing' by governments and the media, however the argument presented here is that discourse of educators themselves has done little to help teachers' status. Expanding upon the notion that higher education postgraduate programs can position teachers as 'novice academics' this multimedia article goes further to suggest that a significant portion of educational discourse unwittingly situates teachers simply as novices. To support this, video data from two key note presentations is examined followed by an examination of a teacher-educator text on professional development. It suggests caution and a re-examination of the discourses of education and professional development is needed in order to develop teaching as a profession.

Please note there are two short (25-50 second) video clips embedded in the paper and seven audio files. Teachers' faces have been deliberately pixellated to blur and maintain anonymity; it is the dialogue that provides the important data in these clips. The clips can be played by holding the cursor over the image and clicking.

Introduction

[Historically, Australian teachers] were, with very rare exceptions, vulgar, illiterate, sottish adventurers; the refuse, and insolvent outcasts of some trade, or mechanical occupation... persons of the most worthless character who had formerly been convicts and who were notorious drunkards' (Smart cited in Smyth 1990, 10).

Australia's unique colonial history may have resulted in a poor start for the image of its teachers and thankfully attitudes have come a long way since those early days.

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However, the professional standing of teachers is still one of concern not only in Australia but also at a global level. UNESCO's *World Education Report* in 1998 raised concerns about the declining status of primary and secondary schoolteachers worldwide and similarly the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has posed the question: 'How to devise new models of teacher professionalism and organizational roles, in ways that enhance the attractiveness of the job?' (OECD 2001, 136).

Hoyle (2001) maintains that societal attitudes have remained largely unchanged in the last few decades regarding teachers as a 'semi-profession' along with nurses, social workers, and librarians. However, it has also been argued that their professional status has fluctuated. During the economic expansion and the relatively full employment of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies, education and teachers were left alone enjoying a higher degree of autonomy and salary levels. In the latter part of the seventies and eighties with education being closely linked to un/employment their status and salaries in real terms were eroded (Helsby 1995; Burrow 1996). It was an time of the 'discourses of derision' and 'teacher bashing' (Ball 1990, 22,49) by political leaders and the press, a perspective supported by a number of other leading educators (MacMillan 2003; Ozga 2000; Thomas 2003).

While societal, governmental and media attitudes have all been influential, this situation has not been helped by significant strands of disparaging and sometimes deficit discourses by educators themselves. The existence of patronising attitudes by administrators and teacher-educators towards teachers has been noted (Brown, Ralph & Brember 2002; Brookfield, 1995; Freedman 1998; Scott & Dinham 2002; Smyth 1990), and as Hargreaves (1994, xiv) writes:

In England and Wales, policymakers tend to treat teachers rather like naughty children; in need of firm guidelines, strict requirements and a few short sharp evaluative shocks to keep them up to the mark. In the United States the tendency is to treat and train teachers more like recovering alcoholics: subjecting them to step-by-step programs of effective instruction or conflict management...

From these comments it would appear that teachers are not always held in particularly high esteem even from inside education itself and it would be timely to re-examine these discourses of within.

Critical discourse analysis: A useful tool

The importance of language should not be underestimated as: 'Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or 'constitute' them' (Fairclough 1992, 3) and the practice, transmission, contestation and negotiation of power takes place within discourses (Foucault 1980). Critical discourse analysis (often referred to as CDA) or discourse analysis 'with an attitude' (van Dijk 2001, 97) has been used to penetrate language for deeper, not readily apparent meanings with issues such racism, sexism and power being extensively researched using this technique (e.g. Janks 1997; Wodak 2001; van Dijk 1993). Furthermore age can be an important factor; students in their twenties are likely to employ different discourses to middle aged academics (Edge & Richards 1998).

Universities have been traditionally 'aggregations for the immature' young students yet to complete their academic and professional passage of rites (Walker 1979, 117). In a similar vein the discursive practices of higher education can situate even mature teachers as 'novice academics' (Steirer 2000). The argument of this paper is that the discourses of education perpetuate this novice image and unwittingly serve to infantilize teachers and their professional work.

There is no single formulaic method for conducting CDA (Janks 1997) but includes techniques such as carefully looking at what is foregrounded or made obvious and what is omitted which in some cases can be equally important. Another is the use of the passive, 'it has been decided...' can mask *agency*, the person or group that actually did the deciding. Similarly the use of the pronouns *we*, *you*, *they* can be manipulated to include the reader and certain groups or distance the writer from the topic. The first part of this article is a simple CDA of video data from the keynote addresses of two leading educators at two different conferences. Both of illustrate the neophyte image of teachers within a deficit model, concentrating on what teachers do wrong rather than what they do right. The second half of the article continues by examining a book, *Pursuing Professional Development: The Self as Source*, as an example of a text for professional development which can also, paradoxically, serve to the detriment of teachers' professional standing.

Images of teachers at conferences

Conference A

This first video clip is taken from a conference presentation in the Middle East. The speaker is reinforcing the point of 'it's not what you learn but how you learn' and is advocating a more constructivist teaching and learning paradigm underpinned by a strong use of technology.

Figure 1: Clip 1



fig1

Actually the presenter played a video clip from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) a comedy based on the main character's light hearted teenage rebellion over his schooldays. This film is discussed in Smith's (1999) paper, *Sex, lies and Hollywood's administrators*, which examined the ways in which school principals are often adversely portrayed in movies. However, as can be seen, Ferris Bueller lampooned not only school administrators but teachers as well. Besides being an amusing clip it is interesting to see the audience's reaction.

Figure 2: Clip 2



Note the audience, mainly teachers, laugh and applaud at this jocular call for a more student centred teaching and learning environment. How the same event or data is interpreted can be different (Buford, May and Pattillo 2000) and I must admit giving this a cool reception as it bore a strong resemblance to another presentation a few months earlier, and one which will now be examined in more detail.

Conference B

This conference was held approximately four months earlier and the content of one of the presentations contains interesting parallels. The theme of this particular speech was that of teachers examining the routines and habits of their classroom questioning techniques. This first clip, a 'this is what I was like as a young teacher' anecdote occurred fairly early on in the delivery.

Figure 3: Clip 3



If that was not enough then events took on another turn:

Figure 4: Clip 4



As the speaker notes most of us do have a repertoire of mishaps that have befallen us during our careers but this negative image of young inept teachers is at odds with the reality of an experienced, ageing workforce.

The speaker then returns to his theme of examining questioning habits and is clearly a proponent of teacher-as-researcher movement.

Figure 5: Clip 5



Here he introduces the recommendation that teachers regularly tape their lessons: 'people do do this honestly'. Note the lack of agency in specifying who these people are. This is the kind of task some post graduate and masters students are required to undertake.

Figure 6: Clip 6



Here we see a university practitioner recommending that 'you' presumably the teachers within the audience record their lessons. The presenter then goes on to give three examples of the data such recording can reveal, all of which are deficit in as much as they concentrate on teachers' errors. The one on language placement interviews is examined here:

Figure 7: Clip 7



We see here acknowledgement that these data came from a teacher on a masters course.

Figure 8: Clip 8



Here the presenter defends the teacher: 'neither would I like to suggest that the teacher is in any way at fault for any of the weaknesses in this ... the teacher has very little time'. Note the foregrounding and prominence of the teacher without defining who exactly was in error. If teachers are not given enough time to conduct language placement tests properly then there is also a management and organizational problem.

The actual placement test does prove very interesting, with the teacher-student interactions having certain parallels with the Ferris Bueller clips.

Figure 9: Clip 9



Certainly the teacher is in error for not giving the student time or opportunity to respond. Good practice typically recommends a 1-2 minute period at the beginning of an oral test be allowed for introductions and settling down of often nervous student interviewees, but this entire test appears to have taken 1 minute 7 seconds. It is disappointing that that the speaker did not draw attention to this but was concentrating more on providing supporting evidence for the idea of taking a tape-recorder into the workplace. The final comment: 'It's no good blaming the teacher for this, we have a fundamental mismatch of expectations' is in reference that the data revealed another organizational error. The unfortunate student did not realize it was a placement test but was under the impression it was more of an informal introductory chat to the school.

A discourse of professional development

These two examples of teachers are unusual, not many conference presentations demonstrate this novice image so succinctly, however, this phenomenon is possibly more prevalent and than would first appear. After attending these two conferences I was reading Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) *Pursuing Professional Development:*

The Self as Source, and was struck by the fusion of *teacher, student, classmate* and *colleagues* throughout the text. For example, from the chapter recommending the keeping of a reflective journal:

If you are an experienced teacher, or if you've done some teaching practice teaching think about a time when you had a successful lesson...Tell a peer about the event, or write a paragraph about the event if you are working alone. Write your thoughts, substantiating them with examples where possible, and exchange your paper with a colleague or fellow student for the discussion of the pros and cons (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan 2001, 61-62).

And from the chapter suggesting action research:

If you are working with a group of classmates or colleagues, it may be helpful to compare your responses. Remember though that appropriate types of data will vary from one action research project to another, depending on the goals and participants involved (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan 2001,140).

Again there is an unwitting but potentially subtle form of infantilization as *students* and *classmates* are used interchangeably with *experienced teachers* and *colleagues*. The book was written by three leading international teacher educators with chapters on: 'Peer Observation, Action research, Teaching Portfolios, Teaching Journals, Reflective Teaching, Team Teaching, Self-awareness and Self-observation, Videos for professional development and Mentoring' (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001, 239) invaluable techniques for teacher training and as the back cover states the book is published with masters students in mind. However, much as with the recommendation of the speaker at conference B, the book draws on tasks from teacher training and postgraduate courses and recommends them for generic use as professional development. How many teachers, lecturers, administrators, managers or other professionals, engineers, architects and so forth keep journals, observe each other, take tape recorders into their workplace or write journals unless part of a course, funded project or an eye to a publication? Although a little questioning that many professionals engage in such activities without some form of extrinsic motivation I must admit the three authors do practice what they espouse and report on their own classrooms and professional life:

CLASSROOM JOURNAL ENTRY

As I reflected on the last class I had today, I became more and more despondent. The lesson, which had begun well enough, ended in confusion, if not chaos. And it was to have been significant, for it was the first day of collecting data for my new research project. I was looking at the different patterns of interaction that were stimulated by different kinds of communicative tasks. I put the students into small groups, and then placed a portable cassette recorder in the center of each group. However, I had underestimated the time it would take to set up the recorders and make sure they were working correctly. During the lesson, I constantly had to go around the class, checking that the recorders were still working, so I didn't pay sufficient attention to classroom management. My instructions were unclear and some students became confused. Finally, they rebelled. I noticed in several groups that the students were switching off their recorders. Later, after the class, one of them admitted to me that, despite my disclaimer to the contrary, they thought I would be using the data on the tape to evaluate them (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan 2001, 143)

One has to admire a number of these honest, candid accounts; even a teacher educator and professor of international repute can have a bad day. Academic modesty may well preclude relating a glowing account of one's own teaching, however, like the tape-recording episode such discourses can overly concentrate on the downsides of classroom life. Perhaps as teachers we do ourselves an injustice at times with such confessional teacher 'self laceration' (Brookfield 1995) within a 'disease' or deficit model rather than celebrating success (Clark 1992). Actually, a colleague commenting on an earlier draft of this research recalled attending a conference in America and seeing this particular author, a very accomplished public speaker, giving a keynote address which had the audience 'eating out of his hand'.

Teacher development and demographics

Lifelong learning has become deeply entrenched in educational policy and management (Bagnall 2000) and the construct of continuous professional development (CPD) has become not only voluntary but mandatory in many professions (Friedman and Phillips 2002). However an important factor largely overlooked is that teachers are part of an aging workforce in many countries, whereas, the discourses of education remain heavily biased towards students and the newly qualified.

There are a number of models which chart the ebb and flow of the career stages in teaching, Christensen and Fessler (1992) propose: *induction, competency building, enthusiastic and growing, career frustration, stable and stagnant and wind-down*. This closely resembles research on Swiss teachers who experience 'survival' during the first few years of induction which can evolve into professional activism, bitterness or serenity during their later years (Huberman 1992). A study of North American academics also noted the dangers of burnout and a desire for renewal or search for self actualization amongst university educators in their fifties (Karpiak 2000). With the present demographics of educators such issues have become of major importance. A question Bailey, Curtis and Nunan pose in their concluding chapter:

Check - Think about your likely role as a teacher five or ten years from now. How do you think your preferences [for PD] will change in that time period? (If you are an experienced teacher, you could also reflect on how your preferences have changed over the past decade) (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan 2001, 239).

Note that once again there is an implicit assumption that the reader is a new teacher at the beginning of a career with the second statement for experienced teachers subordinated by the brackets. However, this is a potentially pressing question not only for teachers but teacher-educators, professional development coordinators, administrators and policy makers. Will seasoned teachers necessarily feel a sense of progression or development by repeating tasks already done in their training or are other alternatives to be explored? Research in Hong Kong questions conventional in-service teacher CPD and suggests the use of paid or unpaid study leave after a number of years of practice (Ho and Yip 2003) and it is perhaps avenues such as these that need exploration. Indeed, sabbaticals and job exchanges have been on the

wish list for school leaders as well (Kegan and Lahey 1984). Possibly all seasoned educators could benefit and develop from a change of routine.

Conclusion

Fortunately the discourses of derision and teacher bashing appear to be waning. Moves for the increased recognition of teaching as a profession are already in motion in such countries as the USA, Britain and Australia (Ramsay 2000; Semple 2001) However, this momentum can be accelerated by critical reflection of educators themselves. The argument has been that a significant portion of discourses in education infantilizes teachers by assuming them to be young and inexperienced, whereas many are nearer to retirement than the outset of their careers. Professionals with 10, 20, 30 years of experience may not necessarily feel a sense of progression or development in repeating tasks undertaken during their training or be attracted towards diluted masters assignments. A number of teachers like other professionals are pursuing (and paying for) CPD/life long learning through accredited postgraduate courses, masters and doctorates, a feature of professional life that needs to be more fully acknowledged. Such learning not only maintains employability or enhances career prospects but can also imbue a sense of challenge, progression and self actualisation.

One of the great paradoxes of education is that despite the abundant rhetoric surrounding continuing professional development, teaching may not even qualify as a true profession. Critical reflection on educational discourses by all educators could help ensure teaching is truly acknowledged as one, and the sometimes infantilizing deficit discourses become, like the drunken convict image of early colonial Australia, an amusing part of history.

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