

The Illusion of Certainty

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We live in an age when there is a serious lack of certainty. The television channels are filled with news of multi-billion dollar bail-outs to save us from the economic experts. The local Cameron Inquiry, investigating faulty hormone receptor testing, indicates that more than 40 per cent of retested samples had been wrong. Cynics would claim that this result is still better than flipping a coin. I am writing this paper at a time when I am directing a play called *Doubt*. This play deals with two key elements in our lives—doubt and certainty. These elements are also a constant in our academic work. Only naive positivists believe they have a grasp on certainty. Recognizing that illusion of certainty is a healthy academic exercise.

Some time ago I wrote an article for this journal called “Dancing with Paradigms” (*The Morning Watch*, Winter 2006-Fall 2007, *Studies in Newfoundland Education and Society*, Vol. IV (2002, p. 1289), which explored the place and value of critical research. Each term I revisit many of the claims made in that article to check my own level of over-certainty. On a more important matter, I have become curious about how some graduate students, who are exposed to various approaches to research, gravitate to critical educational research. There are many times when I believe that I can guess what students will be most comfortable with quantitative, qualitative, or critical research [Illusions are ever present]. I want to explore my understandings of how some graduate students building on their own ideologies and experiences, move toward realizing that critical research can often be the best approach for dealing with the complexities of educational, social, and cultural life.

The context for this piece is a graduate course that consists of quantitative, qualitative, and critical approaches to educational research. This course examines ways of knowing, educational theories, and methodologies as they apply to the various approaches to research in education. The course was developed and is taught by a team of professors. As I indicated above, my particular interest here is in how graduate students accept, respond to, and eventually gravitate to one of these approaches. This journey has taken on a particular fascination for me.

The raw material for this piece consists of hundreds of final papers from graduate students who have been exposed to three approaches to research. Furthermore, I draw on countless hours of thesis and dissertation supervision, where graduate students examine their ideologies, practices, and comfort levels as they agonize over their own research practice. Part of the exercise with graduate students is to indicate the array of approaches to educational research. In this way students can better appreciate that their own divergent thinking and research interests are not out of tune with the rest of the academic world. One other aspect of this process is to help graduate students appreciate the significance and complexity of what they do. This often means trying to set a context for the ever-changing site of educational research.

Given my own ideologies and interests, I stress that critical social research attempts to reveal the socio-historical specificity of knowledge and to shed light on how particular knowledge reproduces structural relations of inequality and oppression, as well as liberation and

transformation. The intent of critical social research is to expose enduring structures of power and domination, to deconstruct the discourses and narratives that support them and to work as advocates for social justice. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) claim, “an emerging approach to educational research is the paradigm of critical educational research” (p.26). I will add that this approach is also foundational to the work I do in theatre: thus the present production of *Doubt*.

We are not always comfortable with a critical education theory that looks at the role that education reciprocally plays in the shaping of public life. In particular, critical education theory interrogates how public life is shaped through the exercise of power used instrumentally through the medium of education. We need to realize that critical education theory sees education as being shaped by the structures and the powers that exist in the wider society, but it also sees education as a powerful force for shaping the minds, perceptions, beliefs and behaviours of the general public. This is where fundamental questions about who shapes the official curriculum, whose knowledge counts, and how classrooms and administrative offices are shaped by the contexts of social, political and economic forces. As Kincheloe (2003) tells us:

Our understanding of an educational situation depends on the context within which we encounter it and the theoretical frames that the researcher brought to the observation. These ideological frames are the glasses through which we see the world...The explicit rules which guide our generation of facts about education are formed by particular world views, values, political perspectives, conceptions of race, class, and gender relations, [as well as] definitions of intelligence (p.61).

The impact of such an approach, with such loaded questions, is not lost on graduate students. They realize very quickly that these questions have to be applied to their own work in teaching and learning. We are not talking about “the other” here, we are talking about ourselves. It is easy to see why there would be much greater comfort with simply sending out a survey and having it computer coded. Having said that, it is my experience that many graduate students are not afraid to ask the hard questions. They often realize that, if there is to be any possibility of transformation, the vexing questions need to be asked and institutional structures and practices need to be interrogated.

Part of the concern for graduate students, who have been exposed to thoughts of objectivity, is in realizing that any attempt to dispense with values, historical circumstances, and political considerations in educational research is misguided. Another issue has to do with accepting that understanding a particular educational issue is very often locked into context, plus acknowledging the conceptual frames they bring to the inquiry. They had been told, or have assumed, that, for research to be valuable, it should not be tainted by researcher- belief systems. Some students prefer to be just told “how to do it”. I have found that, especially in recent years, such students are in the minority.

Graduate students write that their desire to change the status quo stemming from the issue of emancipation is one particular area; for example, dealing with schoolyard bullying. They see the purpose of critical research is to change a problematic situation or phenomena, and merely understanding it is not enough. They further claim that critical approaches to educational inquiry need to enable powerless people to understand and change their world. Some graduate students assert if they stand by and refuse to question the issues/concerns in their own

surroundings, they will become dormant. It has been forcefully stated, once again by graduate students I work with, that a main philosophical thought behind critical research is that it should result in emancipation of the disempowered, bringing about social change. It is encouraging to see local school districts put new emphasis on social justice. This is now evident in professional development. This move is not easy, for it is a struggle against hegemony, risking disturbance of the status quo, and desiring the improvement of education by changing it. This realization is a powerful one, especially when it is internalized in a fashion that impacts on, and transforms work in teaching and learning. Graduate students tell me that we are in a better position to do this when we realize that our educational problems and solutions are both linked to social, political, cultural, and economic realities.

The field of Critical Education Theory has been in existence almost as long as there has been formal compulsory schooling, that is, for slightly more than a hundred years. Early studies involved the relationship between schooling and democracy. [John Dewey](#)'s work in the early 20th Century was important here. Similarly, the writings of people like Bertrand Russell, [Ivan Illich](#), [Paulo Freire](#) and many others have contributed greatly to our understanding of the ways in which education serves the interests of society's dominant culture. This work is being carried on in some masterful ways with the people involved in The Paulo and Nina Freire International Project For Critical Pedagogy (<http://freire.mcgill.ca/>).

Research is a value-laden activity, from the choice of research subject and the questions to investigate, through to the interpretations and publication of results. Critical research is not afraid to reveal its theoretical, political and ideological underpinnings. It actively engages with and challenges dominant assumptions and 'taken for granted' ways of knowing. Its critical credentials are especially clear when it is employed to reveal the hidden agendas, partialities and limitations of 'official' research and when it is part of an ongoing process of, and advocacy for, radical social change. Graduate students appreciate that critical research seeks to uncover what is and to change it. Critical educational research challenges the norm, the usual way of doing things, with the expectation that change is powerful and can occur at the individual as well as societal level. They also realize that the researchers' own values are part of the process and the research is value-laden, whether that includes the choice of subject, the questions, or the interpretation. Collaboration and creative interaction between researchers and the researched is of mutual benefit.

Critical educational research should seek to move beyond understanding and describing in order to provide a systematic critique of the conditions under which particular educational practices occur. If critical educational research is to lead to any real transformation or institutional change, then all the factors that effect schooling must be critiqued. Critical educational research should always begin with the notion that knowledge is structured by existing social relations. Educational research should never be done in a vacuum. Problems do not occur in a vacuum so how could solutions to these problems occur in a vacuum? It should also be noted that educational instances can not be observed without reference to the shared educational values and beliefs of those involved with the critical research. We can only make sense of our research findings if they are placed against the background of a shared educational framework of thought. This is one of the reasons that solutions to educational problems must be produced and presented in their social, cultural, historical, economic, and political context. In addition to this, critical educational research should concern itself with the values, beliefs, judgments, and interests of the people involved with the particular research

project. We have to remind ourselves that knowledge is never the product of a mind that is detached from the realities of daily concerns. Knowledge is produced out of human activity that is motivated by natural needs and interests. We also know that the road we are on is never ending: as Augusto Boal (1979) says, the play is never finished. As you have noted, the challenges of transformation are ever with us. Once again I turn to my graduate students for insight and inspiration. These graduate students often plan critical research approaches to tackle difficult issues related to their own work. One experienced teacher took on the perturbing issue of student expulsion from public school. She believes that it is through the critical action research process that she would question the use of expulsion, and indicate how unfair, biased, and ineffective this disciplinary method is. Through critical action research she would attempt to initiate a change of the school discipline policy. The graduate student stated that this form of punishment creates waves that ripple far from the initial splash and flows into a variety of contexts; the overall effect of expulsions radiates from the student to the teacher, administrators, parents, guidance counsellors, and board and department members. It is a never-ending road that sets up vicious cycles in schooling. Given the work context of many of the graduate students I talk with, critical educational research, on so many issues, could be conducted using an action research approach which lies in the will to improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as the conditions under which teachers and students work in schools. These bright graduate students, as experienced teachers, believe that emancipatory action research moves beyond technical and practical improvements and towards the transformation of societies so as to realize the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. One graduate student sums up a lot of what I am writing about when she refers to the journey through the various research paradigms and comes to the conclusion that her particular work can only be realized through research that moves beyond the literal, pass the quantitative and qualitative, and into the realm of research that breeds inquiry, challenge, and change. Lovely, isn't it?