0114

Changing contexts: Doing educational work

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Background

This paper uses the concept of 'changing contexts' to consider the implications of lifelong learning reforms for education. It plays on grammatical ambiguity between 'changing' as an adjective, describing the shifting character of contexts, and as a verb, implying an active agenda oriented towards practical politics.

Building on other papers in this symposium, I make a case for re-reading specific changes in the context as a positive agenda for change in education. Specifically, I argue that lifelong learning reforms have interactive effects critical to the politics of working life in our times. These reforms, prompted by the global economy and increased global interdependence, have reconfigured teaching (Niemeyer), recontextualised the division of labour between workers and their educators (Henriksson), and intensified the temporal and spatial organization of working life (Colley). It is these interactive effects that have undercut teaching as an occupation and made occupational renewal difficult. Addressing these developments requires a re-consideration of 'teaching' as the 'work of educating'.

Research Questions

This research is structured around three broad questions:

1. What are the implications of changing contexts?
Our original project opened up this question through case studies of teaching, nursing and social work in Finland, Germany, US, UK, and Australia. Interrogating these cross-nationally, we recognised that (a) transforming politics was mostly invisible and (b) similar effects of flexible capitalism in these human service occupations were read differently as a consequence of taken-for-granted framing anchored in occupational, national and disciplinary cultures. Re-reading between and across these cultural understandings provided ways of disrupting established interpretive frames to reveal the invisibilised politics in working life, using 'researcher-as-subject' methodologies.

2. What does it mean to do educational work?
What (Sennett 1998) describes as an 'illegible regime of power' therefore became legible, a familiar gender-class politics, but mediated particularly through knowledge practices and texts. Distinguishing 'education' from both 'socialisation' and 'schooling' (Hamilton 1989) provided a lexicon for analysis. The term 'educational work' captured a broad and widely dispersed form of labour that enacts moral and political agendas through living, learning and leading. Educational work 'makes spaces of orientation' that build individual and collective capacities for action in ways that are oriented towards preferred futures.

3. Who educates the educator?
Marx's third Thesis on Feuerbach notes that changing circumstances change identities and capacities for action. Yet the delineation of educator from learner institutionalises two classes, one that knows and the other that doesn't know. In changing times these social relations of teaching-learning are disrupted. Both educator and learner are required to make sense of their contexts in order to navigate through their working lives lived in unfamiliar circumstances. These conditions fuel a politics of knowing that play out in struggles over institutionalisation, imaginaries, rules and resource allocations (Fairclough 2001). They encourage the loss of utopias and cultural anchorpoints creating uncertainty, anomie and political passivity. Recognising the mutuality of teaching and learning in educational work, and its significance across all communities and workplaces, creates the terms and conditions for a

'politics of we'. This collective identification permits a re-recognition of agency and the social responsibility to use power (including expertise) responsibly.

Methods

These key research questions frame a global ethnography of educational work. This research program has deployed empirical case study research, document and discourse analysis, and researcher-as-subject strategies to support cross-national dialogue, which reveals relationships between changing contexts and educational work at and between different scales (individual, occupational, organisational, national and transnational) (Seddon, 2009).

Frame

The program is anchored by the 'problematic of structuring' that is revealed through cultural historical sociology. This problematic focuses on 'what people do in the present as a struggle to create a future out of the past, of seeing that the past is not just the womb of the present but the only raw material out of which the present can be constructed' (Abrams 1982: 8). We frame our research in the light of the cultural turn in social theory, which recognises the way social structures and processes are mediated by cultural practices. This distinguishes between uses of knowledge-power (discourse) and knowledge about the world (social knowledge) and considers the way narratives (ontological, public, conceptual and metanarratives) are (and can be) mobilised in everyday life to create a knowledge culture (Somers 1994).

This paper illustrates my argument about educational work as a positive agenda for education using case studies based on researcher-as-subject analysis of doing educational work and an analysis of secondary literature related to South Africa. These cases allow me to elaborate the rationale and distinguishing features of 'educational work'.

Research findings

This paper:

1. Clarifies the nature and significance of 'educational work' interfacing with both socialisation and schooling, but different to both. It entails more than socialisation, and goes beyond forms of institutionalised learning which have been coopted as an instrument of government.

2. Identifies 'educational work' as a distinctive form of labour. Educational work rests on expertise in making spaces of orientation for dignified living against the grain of neo-liberal intensifications. This educational work supports self work and working with others by mobilising resources of space-time, knowledge, sociality and distance-proximity that construct practical locales, fabricate relationships and build community/collective capacities for action. The terms and conditions of these spaces of orientation enable and shape the politics of 'we' across citizens, communities, societies and scales.

3. Suggests that 'educational work' offers an anchorpoint for occupational identity, licence and mandate in ways that are consistent but also in tension with lifelong learning reforms. This agenda for practical politics steps beyond narrow institutionalisation focused mostly on children and young people, and recognises the wider contribution that those with expertise in educational work can make to contemporary societies and the challenges of living interdependently in a globally connected world. It recognises that educational work supports collective agency morally and politically; forms citizen-workers that can navigate the challenges of interdependence; develops capacities for securing public agreements about the way we govern ourselves to support dignified living; and uses power responsibly in a changing world.