

Title of workshop: **Unity in Educational Thinking**

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### **Unity in Educational Thinking**

In this session I would like to make the argument that thinking in education, or more precisely, educational thinking properly so-called, has an inherent unity that is all too often overlooked, or even disregarded. The term ‘educational research’, which we regularly use, suggests such a unity, indeed presupposes it: namely, a range of complementary enquiries that illuminate the undertakings of teaching and learning, helping to make such undertakings more coherent in thought and more fruitful in practice.

We frequently find today however that such enquiries, in educational research as in other fields, tend to follow paths of increasing specialisation. Where the field in question is human action (as distinct from a phenomenon or natural process) the risks of such specialisation include a loss of the coherence that these very enquiries should advance, and its replacement by what we might call centrifugal research efforts. Here methods are mainly drawn from one or other of the natural or social sciences, and thus tend to follow the logic of scientific ‘parent disciplines’. There is every likelihood that research enquiries into human action undertaken from such a stance will distort or fragment the very field of their enquiry, losing sight of that field’s ethical substance and of its contribution to the wider domains of human scholarship. Iris Murdoch’s wise insight comes to mind here: ‘But a serious scholar who is also a good man knows not only his subject but the proper place of his subject in the whole of his life’ (Murdoch, 2004, p. 94). Where fragmentation becomes institutionalised, this aggravates the danger and hastens the loss of unity and coherence that educational thinking should embody and promote.

To cultivate and preserve the inherent unity of educational thinking, I suggest there are three related steps to be kept in mind, which I call, in summary: focusing, participation and equilibrium. In the first step, thinking focuses attentively on its subject matter, namely the experience of learning and its promotion through teaching, and receives its character from the nature of that subject matter. This means that educational thinking must remain conscious of the pedagogical nature of its own domain of enquiry and action. To lose sight of this in favour of a more academic or abstract kind of thinking, or of a disengaged scientific kind, is to start already on a wrong path.

Arising from this, to say that the second step is participation is to say that in educational thinking the thinker is herself a participant, as distinct from being a detached scientific observer. That is not to say that demands for objectivity are abandoned, but that the objectivity to be achieved

by such participation is different in kind and in degree from that sought by the natural sciences. It may be no less the worse for that, but it is an objectivity that calls for a circumspect sense of appraisal, and of self-appraisal, wherever educational thinking is carried out.

The third step is one which seeks to achieve a subtle equilibrium (Gadamer, 1996) between contradictory possibilities in research-informed thinking, especially the kind I have described here as educational thinking. The possibilities in question can be characterised, for the sake of simplicity, as follows: on the one hand, the individual, subjective attitude of a teacher to her students and her educational interests; on the other hand, the kind of objectivity that necessarily confronts each person who experiences the inter-human world as a socially and historically constructed one.

If the teacher simply accepts such a dichotomy as a fact of life, if she neglects the struggle involved in achieving some balance, her teaching may become essentially one-sided, either privileging an objectivist view of knowledge over the students' needs to make sense of such knowledge in their own experiences, or *vice versa*. In such conditions teachers can become dominated by what they take to be the demands of objective knowledge but neglect the students' need to understand the moral significance of what they are studying. Alternatively, they may fall victim to a pastoral stance that prizes each student's individuality but neglects the objective demands for different kinds of proficiency in the different subjects being studied. The teacher can overcome the kind of difficulty in question only by resisting a domination by objectivism on the one hand or by subjectivism on the other. When teachers and students are able to focus *together* in their thinking on that which confronts their educational experience, and when they really engage together in the subject matter, finding a balance, albeit a provisional one, becomes possible. What we can say about the equilibrium in question then is that it correlates with the healthy quality of relationships that the teacher develops in her thoughtful being-with the students..

In conclusion, the three steps I'm putting forward here highlight the ethical dimension of educational thinking: that is to say, the continuing struggle involved in negotiating a path between poles, through which the unity of educational thinking becomes manifest not just in thought, but also in action.

## References

- Gadamer, H.-G. (1996) *The Enigma of Health. The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. by J.Gaiger and N. Walker (Cambridge Polity Press).
- Murdoch I. (2004) *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul)

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