Themes in the work of Richard Pring

Professor Michael Hand

School of Education, University of Birmingham
m.hand@bham.ac.uk

Professor Richard Pring
Dr Richard Davies
Dr Judith Suissa
Paper 1: Integral education and Pring’s liberal vocationalism

A central strand in Richard Pring’s work has been the rejection of the ‘false dualism’ between the liberal and the vocational (Pring, 1995, p.183). In the following discussion, I explore the connections between Pring’s approach and the anarchist idea of ‘integral education’.

The idea of integral education was a central feature of the writings of leading 19th and early 20th century anarchist thinkers. Kropotkin, in his classic 1890 essay ‘Brain work and manual work’, argued against the false dichotomy between these two ideas, in a manner echoed in Pring’s own rejection of this ‘false dualism’. Kropotkin declared:

Instead of ‘technical education’, which means the maintenance of the present division between brain work and manual work, we advocate the éducation intégrale, or complete education, which means the disappearance of that pernicious distinction. (Kropotkin, 1890, p.458)

Kropotkin’s ideas were translated into practice in many early anarchist and libertarian schools, where the commitment to integral education was reflected in the school curriculum, pedagogy and ethos. At Sebastien Faure’s libertarian school, La Ruche, established in France in 1904, for example, all children studied a general programme of academic activities alongside learning a craft in a series of workshops, with a concerted attempt to break down the academic/vocational divide at all levels of the curriculum. Louzon (in Smith, 1983, p.42) gives the example of a maths lesson that was based on children’s experience of work in a foundry, where they were given information about the number of employees, their status and their earnings, and then asked to work out the answers to questions about their yearly average and difference. Similarly, in the Escuela Moderna in Barcelona in 1904, a large part of the curriculum consisted in practical training, and most anarchist schools had a communal garden, where the children grew their own vegetables while learning about food production and preparation as well as biology and related academic areas.

As these examples suggest, anarchist educators saw the division between brain work and manual work not just as an unfortunate false dualism which ‘bedevils our deliberations on education’ (Pring, 1995, p.83), but as inherent in the very form of the capitalist state. The only way to break down this dichotomy and the associated inequalities was to provide an education that both rejected it and challenged the values and social structures that sustained it.

The anarchist demand for integral education cannot be reduced to a demand for a more holistic vision of the educated person, combining the vocational and the liberal. Behind the anarchist position was a vision of a society not structured by hierarchies or inequalities of wealth, and founded on the moral principles of self-governance, individual freedom, fraternity and mutual aid. In this respect, these early experiments in integral education constituted part of the project of prefiguring, through different kinds of social relationships, a radically different mode of social organization.

It is here, I think, that the important contrast with Pring’s work can be found. For whereas Pring acknowledges the social and economic context of education, his orientation is towards
existing society: ‘The key question, therefore, is: what are the knowledge, skills, understandings and attitudes – the mental powers - which a person needs in order to act and behave as an educated person in our society’ (Pring, 1995, p.109). Anarchists, in contrast, started from the position that there was something deeply wrong with society as they saw it, and that this required radical change.

The suggestion that education should be not just about preparing children to take up their role in the existing social structure, but about questioning and challenging that structure, is more pertinent than ever today. While Pring criticises an ideal of traditional liberal education cut off from ‘the world of work’, the worry at present is not just that many children will be condemned to a life-time of mundane, dehumanising work, but that many face the very real prospect of not finding work at all.

The structural unemployment now characterising many advanced capitalist states is, as several theorists have noted, ‘causally linked to processes of restructuring in the world economy and the tendential emergence of a global labour market’ (Overbeek, 2003, p.11). David Blacker’s recent work has spelled out the consequences of this reality for the institutional provision of education. Even if one is not convinced by his unremittingly bleak analysis, Blacker is surely right in pointing out that the narrative of ‘working class kids getting working class jobs’ seems less relevant in an age when so many young people face a future of precarity in an ever-shrinking labour market. As he says, ‘the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all’ (Robinson, in Blacker, 2013, p.102).

Richard Pring has eloquently criticised the increasingly dominant language of instrumentalism haunting educational policy, defending the liberal idea that ‘to be educated, therefore, is at least to be in possession of those understandings, knowledge, skills and dispositions whereby one makes sense of the world around one’ (Pring, 1997, p.84). Yet the world around one, for many children, is one where their future looks increasingly precarious. Thus Pring’s question: ‘What, given the particular economic context in which we live, are the aims of education?’ (Pring, 1995, p.103) should perhaps be replaced by the question: ‘What kind of education can best address the serious problems inherent in the economic context in which we live?’ As anarchists have long argued, schools can be a site for imaginative and critical learning and experimentation aimed at understanding, questioning and challenging prevailing social and political structures and ideas.

**Paper 2: Education for moral seriousness**

A recurring theme in Richard Pring’s work over the last twenty years has been the idea that children and young people should be educated for what he calls ‘moral seriousness’. He has characterised moral seriousness in various ways: as a ‘capacity for being serious about life’ (Pring, 1997, p.38); as ‘a concern to work out what kind of life is worth living and should command our allegiance’ (Pring, 1999, p.167); as ‘seriousness in asking what kind of life is worth living, what is worth pursuing in leisure or career, what obligations are to be considered sacred’ (Pring et al., 2009, p.20); and, most recently, as a ‘caring about values’ (Pring, 2013, p.36).
Pring is quite clear that educating for moral seriousness involves initiating children into academic disciplines. If we are to work out what kind of life is worth living, he argues, we must ‘learn and eventually engage with the voices of poetry, of history, of science, of philosophy’ (Pring, 1999, p.163). Knowledge and understanding of the physical world, the social world, the aesthetic world and the moral world are necessary for any serious examination of the values one adheres to. If education is properly concerned with the questions of ‘what it means to be, and to become more, human’, it must ‘draw upon those traditions within the humanities, the arts, the social sciences where such questions are systematically explored’ (p.171).

But Pring holds that, while initiation into academic disciplines is necessary, it is not sufficient. Answers to practical questions do not simply fall out of theoretical inquiries. To know about calculus, crustaceans, Cavaliers and Constable is not yet to know what kind of life is worth living. The arts, humanities and sciences certainly shed light on the nature and justification of the values one adheres to, but they are not so illuminating as to settle these matters. What is needed is ‘a broader conception of education, which draws upon the liberal tradition but which goes beyond it’, a conception ‘based on the idea of the whole person – as a doer as well as a thinker, a social person as well as an individual, responsible to others as well as to oneself, exploring what is a worthwhile form of life as well as being introduced to the best examples of it’ (Pring, 1995, p.131-5).

I think Pring is right that a purely academic education does not adequately prepare children for the asking and answering of serious practical questions. But what exactly might we do to make good the deficiencies of the academic curriculum? Granted that being serious about life requires more than immersion in a range of arts, humanities and sciences, what else is needed? How can children be encouraged to ask and helped to answer questions about the kind of life worth living?

Pring’s rather vague answer is that we should supplement the academic curriculum with opportunities for children to ‘make personal’ the knowledge and understanding they acquire. He suggests that we think of education as having ‘two interconnected aspects’, one public and one personal:

The first is a nurturing of understanding of what it is to be human through a gradual participation in the public world of literature, social studies, the arts and science wherein these understandings are developed. The second is an enabling of the pupils to reach a personal resolution of what that means in the serious deliberations about how to live – an issue which, at very many different levels (those of relationships entered into, further vocational training taken up, leisures and hobbies pursued, values taken seriously, ideals followed) is the concern of all young people. (Pring, 1999, p.169)

Unfortunately Pring says little about what ‘making personal’ might look like in the classroom. He cites Jerome Bruner and Lawrence Stenhouse in this connection, but neither Bruner’s account of learning about ourselves through the study of others nor Stenhouse’s account of forming personal views on contested issues adequately fills out the ‘broader conception of education’ Pring says we need.

What, then, does education for moral seriousness require, over and above initiation into academic disciplines? The answer, I suggest, is initiation into forms of practical inquiry.
There must be room on the curriculum for direct, sustained attention to practical questions about how to live and what to value; children must be brought to see the point and urgency of these questions, persuaded that they are tractable, and enabled to reach satisfactory answers to them. Forms of practical inquiry are, to be sure, less well-defined and often less conducive to definitive answers than their theoretical counterparts, but these are hardly insurmountable barriers to teaching them in schools.

We can divide forms of practical inquiry into two broad categories. Some are self-attentive, which is to say that attention to the inquirer’s personal preferences and aptitudes figures properly and centrally in the deliberative process. Others are self-inattentive, which is to say that attention to the inquirer’s personal preferences and aptitudes is absent or marginal. Whether a form of practical inquiry is self-attentive or self-inattentive depends on the degree to which it is concerned with judgments of fit between oneself and one’s options. When deliberating about whether to live in a city or a village, for example, one is trying to match up the features of urban and rural living with one’s aesthetic sensibilities, cultural preferences and leisure interests, so attention to the self has a significant role to play. By contrast, when deliberating about whether to support political measures to mitigate climate change, one is assessing the severity of the threat, the need for a coordinated response and the merits of the measures proposed: one’s own tastes and talents don’t come into it.

There are four forms of practical inquiry – two self-attentive and two self-inattentive – for which I think it is especially important that schools try to equip children. They are forms of inquiry that young people can scarcely avoid, that have far-reaching consequences for their lives, and that are by no means straightforward. The self-attentive forms are vocational inquiry and relationships inquiry; the self-inattentive forms are moral inquiry and political inquiry. Pupils must have opportunities to deliberate about careers and relationships, with a view to finding a fit between the options available and their personal preferences and aptitudes. And they must have opportunities to deliberate about morality and politics, with a view to making considered choices about subscription to moral standards and support for political causes.

Paper 3: Towards common-sense-informed teaching

There is an increasing emphasis on research-informed teaching. Alongside this are a range of grassroots movements to support ‘teacher inquiry’ in their classroom (e.g. ResearchEd). This offers the potential for a heady mix of systematic study and the utilisation of professional experience. Such movements are reminiscent of the practitioner research movements of the 1970s (Stenhouse, 1975; Elliott and Adleman, 1975). It was in this period that Richard Pring wrote in defense of ‘common sense’, and the need for educational researchers to deploy the language of teachers in their scholarly endeavours.

In this paper I consider Pring’s critical analysis of ‘common sense’ and offer some thoughts on its application to contemporary grassroots approaches to teacher inquiry.

Pring develops his account of common sense in dialogue with four educational theorists with whom he disagrees: Paul Hirst, Michael Young, Basil Bernstein and Paul Atkinson. His quarrels with Hirst and Young are that:
Pring favours a median position of ‘theorising that starts with, constantly refers back to, and attempts to make sense of, the rich, complex and puzzling world of practice’ (p.170).

His objections to Bernstein and Atkinson are different. The difficulty is their concern to redescribe what we already know to be the case, but in a language that is alien and confusing to practitioners. Teachers are asked to surrender their normal, common sense ways of talking about their practice, with no discernible benefit (Pring, 1977, p.148).

Common sense, as Pring understands it, has two aspects: common sense judgement and common sense discourse. Both make a positive contribution to practical action. Common sense judgement is ‘concerned with abilities rather than beliefs – the ability to make appropriate practical judgements or to relate theory to the concrete situation or to apply principles to practice’ (Pring, 1976, p.93). This aspect of common sense is an unqualified good for teachers.

Common sense discourse, by contrast, is the stock of everyday beliefs and understandings shared by a social group (p.153). Pring distinguishes between the content of common sense beliefs and the manner in which they are held. His particular interest is in the manner, which is often unreflective and lacking personal justification. The manner of holding common sense beliefs is therefore more problematic than their content.

Although common sense beliefs can be mistaken, it should not be assumed that they are generally false or unreliable. Pring argues that they include ‘certain beliefs about the world ... which in a special sense seem undeniable’ (p.154). They also include tried and tested observations and generalisations about everyday life, without which intelligent action would be impossible (see Perry, 1965, p.127).

Pring says little about the precise role of common sense in teacher inquiry. He does commend the work of Perry on this topic (Pring, 1976, p.98). Perry sets out what is necessary for common sense judgements. We need:

1. Several varieties of knowledge;
2. A clear notion of the problems, to guide us in what is relevant;
3. A commentary on the problem from each of the varieties used;
4. An assessment of the importance we intend to attach to each commentary;
5. A rough idea of the shape of the conclusion we seek, in terms of its concern to us, in order to assess this relative importance of commentaries.

(Perry, 1965, p.135)

Central to my account of teacher inquiry is its role in developing common sense judgements; that is, in the context of teaching, everyday pedagogical craft judgements. In developing this account there are a number of issues that need further illumination. Here I will briefly discuss two of Perry’s conditions for common sense judgements: varieties of knowledge and the nature of commentaries.
Chappell offers a helpful way of conceptualising different ways of knowing. I may know a lot about planing wood and carpenters’ planes, but it is not until I try (and often fail) to plane wood that I realise I do not know how to plane wood, much less to work with the grain as a skilled craftsperson does. I may know about the feel of silk but that is different from knowing the feel of silk. We may be able to express propositionally something about our experiences and technical abilities, but this is different from the experiential knowledge and the know-how itself. Chappell proposes that we think of propositional, experiential and technical knowledge as contributory to a fourth, more fundamental variety of knowledge that we might call ‘objectual knowledge’:

When I have objectual knowledge, say of the tree in my garden, what I know is the object, the tree: not some proposition about the tree, or some experience of the tree, or some technique relevant to the tree. (Chappell, 2012, pp.185)

Teacher’s pedagogical craft knowledge (Brown and McIntyre, 1993) is a specific type of objectual knowledge: the object known is the craft of teaching itself. Objectual knowledge of the craft is the source, and the integrating core, of knowledge about, experience of and technical competence in teaching.

There is a risk in pulling together different varieties of knowledge that one seeks a common form of expression, a shift that often privileges propositional knowledge. Perry is cognisant of this difficulty and calls for the development of commentaries on practical problems from each kind of knowledge. On my account, commentaries are thus to be generated from the propositional, experiential and technical knowledge held by teachers, from what they know about, know from experience and know how to do. Commentaries based on the varieties of common sense knowledge will be supplemented by commentaries generated from the theoretical perspectives of the disciplines. It is from this range of common sense and theoretical perspectives that solutions to practical problems are to be selected and constructed in teacher inquiry.

A common-sense-driven model of teacher inquiry, therefore, requires teachers to come together, to formulate problems to be solved, to share, probe, discuss and evaluate commentaries on the problems, and to agree on ways forward. In attending collectively to the different varieties of common sense knowledge, and to theoretical insights from the different disciplines, they are not only identifying and solving particular practical problems but also deepening their objectual knowledge of the craft of teaching.

**Paper 4: Intelligence bewitched by the use of language**

‘Doing philosophy’ frequently begins with the question ‘what do you mean?’. Most times, of course, ‘what do you mean?’ can be answered without difficulty through clarification within the framework of everyday commonsense beliefs and common words. The life of any community depends upon shared meanings about the physical and social world in which its members live. But even those shared meanings can raise doubts (as Socrates so well illustrated in the *Theaetetus* and elsewhere) concerning the evidence for beliefs held, or the basis of the values pursued, or the place of intentions and motives in explaining the practices observed. In pursuing and overcoming such doubts, so one is entering the realms of theory of
knowledge, of ethics and of the philosophy of mind – and so also one is entering into the ‘conversation’ which has taken place between generations of philosophers.

Paper 2 examines what I once wrote concerning the aims of education and the necessary prevalence of ethical questions in our understanding of such aims. Educational practice, when systematically reflected on (leading to the inevitable question ‘what do you mean by educated?’), is necessarily caught up in the different ways in which the aims of education are conceived and justified – and therefore the perennial issues of ethics which philosophers have tackled. But Paper 2 claims one can go further in the pursuit of ‘moral seriousness’ by initiation into forms of practical enquiry. A distinction is made between self-attentive and self-inattentive practical enquiry – the former embracing deliberation concerning vocational and career possibilities, the latter including the forms of moral and political enquiry. A good example of such a form of moral enquiry, which the writer may have had in mind, would be that analysed by John Wilson (1990). On the other hand, my concern lies in the false dualism which such a distinction may create since the enquiring teenager, reflecting systematically on the career to be pursued, may find it impossible to unravel the self-attentive from the self-inattentive, selection of an apprenticeship at BAE Systems from the moral questions concerning arms manufacture and the political questions concerning their distribution. Moral deliberation blurs these boundaries. That is why what I argue for are deliberative communities which encourage informed discussion of matters of personal significance, constrained by the rules of confidentiality and mutual respect. Such enquiry requires a recognition of (as John Dewey argued) a logical connection between ‘democracy’ and ‘education’.

Paper 1 picks up the theme of misleading dualisms which ‘bewitch the intelligence’ and so easily lead to the ‘hidden nonsense’ referred to by Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1958, 1.464). The division of courses between academic and vocational is surely one of those hidden nonsense which has enormous practical consequences unless it is subjected to philosophical questioning. Is the study of English at university with a view to becoming a journalist academic or vocational? Is the study of engineering as an apprentice, which provides the foundation for a university course, vocational or academic? Despite its regular use in educational policy, the dualism is rarely questioned – thereby leading to the division of learners into academic and practical or vocational streams. Yet within intelligent practice are modes of understanding which can be more or less sophisticated and which can thereby become the basis of more theoretical understanding. And, on the other hand, academic pursuits, disconnected from the practical and experiential world from which they originated, easily become what Dewey referred to as ‘unduly formal or scholastic notions of education… remote and dead – abstract and bookish’ (Dewey, 2016, p.4). As the author of Paper 1 so well demonstrates, the rejection of such a dualism (‘pernicious distinction’) opens up the possibility of a more ‘integral education’ as exemplified in the work of 19th and 20th century anarchist thinkers. The author shows how such unquestioned dualistic thinking supports particular social structures, but also questions my assumption that the educated person needs to be equipped to function in society as it exists, albeit in need of radical reform. It is surely the case that active critique of the structure of society is compatible with nurturing the practical skills to survive within it.

Paper 3 reminds us (and me) of the context (both historical and current) in which reference to commonsense discourse and judgment arose, namely, the advent of teacher-led research to which philosophers of education have contributed, but too often have had to create their own journals to do so. Much educational theory (including philosophy of education) has seemed to me to be an unnecessary ‘bewitchment of our intelligence by the use of language’, which is
why it is seen to have such little relevance to educational practice – that is, what teachers do and what politicians say teachers should do. I admit here to the prejudice arising from going to UCL to study under A.J. Ayer, where much of the course was devoted to pointing out the nonsense of what other philosophers (mainly German and French) had said. Indeed, if you wanted to study Hegel you were despatched to King’s College where Findlay held forth. Rather, however, is there a rich and extensive discourse, which, in terms of the words used and beliefs held, would be regarded as ‘common sense’, and within which one identifies problems to be resolved. It is this ‘everyday language’ which is employed by teachers as they raise questions about what is worth learning and about the steps to be taken to pursue such learning. In this, philosophical questioning has an important place, challenging appropriateness of the descriptions given, detecting hidden values which permeate teaching aims, relating quality of judgments to relevant types of evidence.

It is all a matter of clarifying ‘what you mean’, and doing so systematically such that one necessarily enters the realms of ethics, epistemology, social philosophy and philosophy of mind.

References

Perry, L.R. (1965) ‘Commonsense thought, knowledge and judgement and their importance