EDUCATION – AN IMPOSSIBLE PRACTICE?

RICHARD EDWARDS

STARTING POINTS
The starting point for this article was a chance bit of reading, which has stuck with me. I do not recall where – a failure of referencing! - but I read somewhere that Freud had written that education, like psychoanalysis and politics, is an impossible profession. His argument was that this was the case because none of them could produce predictable outcomes, mandate and thereby master the future. In other words the outcomes of actions are different from what is intended. At one level, this is trivial and trite. There may be educational trajectories framed by class, gender, race, etc, but they are not mandated. This incapacity to mandate is often the impetus for irritation among those trying to introduce changes in education. It is also a constant experience of teachers that students will take up learning in unexpected ways.

However, the desire to mandate the future continues to infuse the practices of education, not least in the realms of education policy. Education is constantly invoked as the way to address this or that economic or social condition. Competitiveness, productivity, equity, inclusion all vie for space as central to the policy purposes of education. And this entails a desire for a form of mastery. To mandate is to attempt to master. Thus the frustration of those doing this invoking at the impossibility of that which they attempt and their continuing efforts to master through standards, accountability and audit (Strathern 2000).

I have been musing on Freud's observation for a while and considering its possible implications as impossibility is a theme also taken up by writers such as Derrida. The impossibility of education means that it finds itself often at the centre of media and political attention. We are overwhelmed with crisis and risk narratives these days and the daily media and policy hysterias (Stronach & MacLure 1997) that incite us to often ill-considered action. These come from all political directions and contribute to the senses of crisis to which they usually position themselves as a response. That there is a problem to be addressed, or that there has been a 'decline' in some shape or form, is a constant theme of media discourse. It seems to be endemic to social change that there are also concerns raised that in some ways these changes mark the decline or end of something. Behind such narratives are a certain fear and often the notion of some golden age in the past against which the present can and should be judged. When the motor car was introduced, it was seen by some as the harbinger of an age of community and religious decline. In 1925, one minister in the southern USA referred to the car as a 'brothel on wheels'. Mobility would encourage people to change their habits of local and religious commitment for alternative pleasures in the highways and byways. Such changes might have played a role in different social habits but whether they marked a decline is open to question. More recently, the advent of the internet and mobile technologies have similarly been surrounded by crisis narratives as to their negative influence on social practices, in particular the capacity to communicate 'properly' and to engage in 'appropriate' social interaction, or face-to-face interaction at all.

In education, we are similarly surrounded by crisis narratives. Almost annually we are confronted with newspaper headlines that standards are falling, education is not producing the results it did, should, etc. Despite rising levels of achievement, marked by the proxy of qualifications, young people can apparently no longer write to the standards previously experienced. People no longer read literature. They engage in non-standard forms of communication, such as texting on mobile phones. People coming through or returning to education are no longer as able

as an earlier generation to read and write and understand as much as would have been the case. Employers constantly complain about the lack of skills, knowledge and dispositions of school and college leavers and graduates. The complaints are endemic, the sense of crisis endless. The evidence is of course more mixed.

How, as educators, do we respond to such crisis narratives given the impossibility of what we do? Often we are contributors to these narratives, but could we be doing other? As educators, do we have a responsibility to stand back and consider the situation differently? It does not take much reading of history to realise that crisis narratives have surrounded education since its inception as a publicly funded practice. In this situation, the responsibility is twofold. First, to examine the historical and social scientific evidence of what is claimed in such crisis narratives. Second, where appropriate, to challenge those narratives. Education is often the first area that is identified as a possible solution to these crises and risks. Whether it is globalisation, economic productivity, religious intolerance, inclusion, obesity, drugs, and terrorism. Education is part of the answer. We might then add to Freud, and say that education is also an impossible practice because, as Bernstein argued long ago, it cannot cure the ills of society and the economy, despite the possible desires for it so to do.

It is an important role for research not to become part of the hysteria surrounding and constructing issues. Yet it is sometimes the case that the ideologies of education do precisely that by laying what I will term 'enthusiasm'-based claims to all sorts of possibilities and achievements – e.g. emancipation, democratic citizenship, inclusion – that need more careful consideration. Here I am distinguishing enthusiasm from engagement, the former almost faith-based, fundamentalist, the latter more considered. I want to argue that educators have a responsibility to engage in the impossibility of what we do, but we cannot readily do this on the grounds of fundamentalist forms of enthusiasm.

An article does not allow me to develop fully my argument, but I hope to provide a skeleton with some sinews attached. And indeed it is to an unusual resource I wish to turn to, in part, in the work of Weber on bureaucracy. I want to pose the possibility that the ethic of bureaucratic responsibility posited by Weber in the nineteenth century has something to offer us in Education in addressing the impossibility of what we do in a responsible way in the twenty first century. Here I follow Paul du Gay's work on bureaucracy and Gert Biesta, Deborah Osberg and Tara Fenwick's work on educational responsibility. My guiding search is for how to act in an educationally responsible way if education is impossible in the sense of not being able to decide, mandate or master the future.

Here I also have to recognise my own task as impossible of course, its emergence incalculable. I enter into this in the spirit that research is a slow and considered conversation, and rightly so. And that posing questions and challenging assumptions is as important as trying to find answers. For, if education is an impossible profession, then what plight the educational researcher, attempting to understand the impossible. Is such a stance possible? Or is impossibility the only possibility open to us? Similar questions have been posed by Law (2004) in his book on mess in social science research. If the world is messy, then how can we understand it through tidy methods? It is through such methods that the social world itself is partly tidied, organised, ordered, its complexity reduced. Rather than finding order in the world, we engage in ordering practices in conventional approaches to research. Both in our methods and in our representations of the world, there is an ordering in play. Similarly, we might say that it is through ordering practices that the impossible is also made possible. It is the nature of that possibility that becomes the question.

Educational research has been subject to strong questioning over the last decade and probably deservedly, if not always for the reasons espoused. The postmodern sensibility of incredulity and doubt are widespread, encompassing a questioning of some knowledge as *intrinsically* worthwhile. The authority invested in certain groupings – the universities, scientific communities, professional bodies, government – is often treated with suspicion and scepticism. There is a diversification of modes, centres and sources of knowledge production, not least of course through the multiplying effects of the internet. The result is less certainty as to what constitutes authoritative discourse and who can speak authoritatively on and as a subject.

Even then, as some governments look to the education research community to provide them with clear evidence to inform policy and practice, those communities are less capable of giving clear messages or directions. This uncertainty is not only at a social level. It is also at an epistemological level. The emergence of complexity theory in science has worked alongside post-structuralism in philosophy to suggest that the world is probabilistic rather than determined (Osberg & Biesta 2007). The impossibility to which Freud alluded therefore may be more general than he envisioned. Truth-tellers and truth-telling are neither clear nor straight-forward, the struggle over which has a long history (Foucault 2001). It is a struggle to which the various strands of thinking about impossibility may push us further into consideration of, as 'how can we distinguish the good, truth-telling teachers from the bad or inessential ones?' (Foucault 2001: 93). This is a crucial educational question, as education is in principle not simply about learning, but about learning *something worthwhile/becoming educated*.

The critique of modernity that is often placed as the door of the postmodern itself has historical antecedents. Modernity's rush to the new in the service of progress and truth has always produced uncertainty, insecurity and ambivalence. This was recognised in the classic analyses and critiques by Marx, Durkheim, Weber and many more contemporary sociological accounts. However, such accounts have often sought to find resolutions through which mastery could be reasserted and undecidability and uncertainty overcome. In other words, implicit to these critiques of modernity has been the failure to master, not that mastery itself is problematic and unobtainable. What I am propounding is that mastery, mandating the future, is an impossibility.

For some, such a stance might be taken as a prophesy of despair and quietude. What is the point of trying to change or improve things if it proves impossible? I have often heard such responses. However, this misses the sense of impossibility I am drawing upon, as an opening, a basis for creativity, for not following standardised approaches to what we do. Derrida is useful here as a more contemporary supplement to Freud. Derrida (1992a) referred to deconstruction as 'the experience of the impossible'. The impossible is that which cannot be foreseen prior to its invention, its actual appearance. To act responsibly therefore is to accept this incalculability to the future, our inability to mandate, and invent on that basis. To not do so, to subsume one's actions to a rationale of thinking that we do know what will happen in the future, is to act irresponsibly. I will return to this later.

The uncertainty of the markers for knowledge that characterise a postmodern condition can be argued to signify a loss of mastery as a goal of education (Edwards & Usher 2001). Yet mastery is inscribed in modernist educational policy making and certain desires to mandate the future. Modernist education provides a training in certain forms of rationality, sensibilities, values and subjectivities. Through this comes a disembodying of learners with a consequent formation of bodies that inscribes a mind/body dualism in its place. Here the more educated you are, the more rational and the more 'civilised'. The extension of education and educational

opportunities is both a symbol of progress in a modern nation state and contributes to progress through the education provided. There is a mastering of the self in the mastering of knowledge and of others.

Mastery of the subject in the many senses of that concept is a key educational goal. Mastery represents a form of completion, an end to learning. However, even as it points to a position of finality and closure, we can point to the oppositions to and incompleteness to which it is subject. Mastery of the subject and subjects and self-mastery themselves become subject to incredulity. There is an incredulity as to the possibility of mastering and mandating, even as ever greater attempts are made to legislate, regulate, discipline and administer. Thus, the attempts at mastery – increasingly inscribed in discourses of standards and targets, and the accounts of accountability - only point to the inability to master. And, as Bowker and Star (2000) argue, standardisation also creates monsters insofar as not everyone fits the standard. Attempts at mastery merely bring forth more deviancy and deviants. This also points to the deconstructive logic within education, the impossibility of mandating the future to which Derrida, Freud and some complexity scientists refer (Osberg & Biesta 2007).

For me, this deconstructive logic is highlighted in the uptake of lifelong learning within policy. At the heart of much educational policy making in recent years are attempts at mastery of uncertainly, incredulity, risk, with lifelong learning positioned as the means to achieve this. Lifelong learning is placed in the centre of certain educational discourses. Yet this search for mastery has within its margins a lack of mastery. The possibilities for lifelong learning in this sense are impossible. For lifelong learning, an unavoidable human activity, does not remedy this lack of mastery, but actually accentuates it further. So the lack of mastery creates the conditions for the endlessness for lifelong learning. Thus, rather than being a solution to the problem of change and uncertainty – a condition for mastery – lifelong learning can be therefore understood differently – as actually fuelling the uncertainty to which it is the supposed response. Rather than a route to mastery, lifelong learning might be better considered a condition of constant apprenticeship (Rikowski 1999) or emergence. It is in its impossibility that the possibilities for lifelong learning emerge. This is marginal to the meanings of lifelong learning policy texts, but I would argue is central to its significance.

PRACTISING IMPOSSIBLY?

Lifelong learning as a policy goal therefore deconstructs the mastery through which it is so often invoked. It is in educational terms an expression of the impossibility of mastery, of mandating the future, even as it is invoked as the basis for continuing to master. Lifelong learning is symptomatic of the impossibility of education. What happens when we try to explore this space of impossibility? What possibilities does it hold? Biesta (2004: 71) has argued that 'something has been lost in the shift from the language of education to the language of learning'. He views this shift as arising from a range of contradictory trends. The four he identifies are new theories of learning, postmodernism, the rise of the consumer market and the decline of the welfare state. Biesta suggests that questions of learning are *educational* questions and that there is a requirement to revitalise a language for education, and the for is significant as he is positioning this discourse as an aspect of action, an ordering.

He bases his argument on three interlocking principles: 'trust without ground, transcendental violence and responsibility without knowledge' (Biesta 2004: 76). With regard to the first, his suggestion is that learning involves the unexpected and that this entails trust because there is risk involved. His second principle involves challenging and confronting students – and note he does not use the notion of learners – with otherness and difference. This entails interrupting them, what he refers to as coming into presence, the possibility of openness to difference. It entails

transcendental violence as it creates difficult situations, but it is only through these that coming into presence is possible. The third principle, responsibility without knowledge, is based on the notion that educators have unlimited responsibility for the subjectivities of students, but this is not based on calculation. In later work with Deborah Osberg (Osberg & Biesta 2007: 47), they suggest that 'teachers are responsible *both* for the emergence of the world (the future) and for the emergence of human subjectivity'. Here we need to bear in mind that emergence is indeterminate, in other words a responsibility based upon impossibility.

These ideas signify notions that are a far cry from any certainty about the teleological goals of education and how they are to be achieved. They are based upon processes of constant invention and renewal rather than ultimate purposes as ends. And perhaps this is as it needs to be. In his critique of critical pedagogy's desire for a language of possibility, Biesta (1998) also draws upon the comment by Freud to which I have referred above. He extends this idea of the impossibility of mandating the future to all human interactions and suggests, drawing on Derrida and Foucault, that practices need to be developed around an 'emancipatory ignorance'. Here

> It just is an ignorance that does not claim to know how the future will be or will have to be. It is an ignorance that does not show the way, but only issues an invitation to set out on the journey. It is an ignorance that does not say what to think of it, but only asks, 'What do you think about it?' In short it is an ignorance that makes room for the possibility of disclosure (Biesta 1998: 505).

Biesta's argument is related specifically to critical pedagogy, but it is relevant to the reformulation of a discourse of education more generally. According to Osberg and Biesta (2007), this is a pedagogy of invention.

Is it possible for the traditional discourses of education to continue or be revitalised unamended? Reading the relevant journals, this certainly is the case. Many discourses drawing on radical traditions rightly position themselves as having a history and forms of continuity that are important. These are often framed within a language of possibility or even longing. However, there are also those who seek to elaborate different discourses to (en)counter incredulity by working with the impossibilities of education. Formulating an educational discourse around apprenticeship, impossibility and ignorance may seem absurd in these performative times. When outcomes and outputs are to the fore, what spaces are there for educational discourses around unending process?

But it is here that I find the concepts of fallibility and conditionality in addition to impossibility helpful. Fallibility because it points to the notion that, even if we practice upon the basis of the best available evidence we have, we know full well it is not perfect, that we cannot mandate. This is turn results in and from a position of conditionality, that is, we *could* do something rather than we *should* do something. Our efforts then are only as good as we currently can establish and they are a process of invention rather than an exercise in mandating and mastery. The normative basis for what we do becomes a more cautiously creative affair, something which I know to be unattractive to many educators who feel the normative potential of education to transform people and societies is unrealised. Fallibility and conditionality provide a basis for invention, for creativity and experimentation in educational practices, based upon impossible possibilities. However, for this to be other than an 'anything goes' approach to education, we now need to return to the question of responsibility.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

My argument so far is that a worthwhile response to the impossibility of education cannot be forged by a reassertion of certainty, as we witness in relation to the many

fundamentalisms that exist, but through fallibility, conditionality and responsibility. What as educators are we responsible for? Lack of productivity and competitiveness, and exclusion have all been laid at the doors of education. Globalising processes are producing yet more challenges – economic, political, cultural – raising important questions for what it means to be educated. The regulatory frameworks we work within seem to position teachers as responsible for the outcomes of students. What sort of ethic could guide educational work, if we agree it is impossible?

This is the least developed part of my discussion and also the one that is most open to misconstrual. Here, therefore, as a stimulus to further this debate, I want to suggest that there is something for the education community to be learned from Weber's classic studies of the ethos of bureaucracy and the more recent work by du Gay (2008, forthcoming) on the ethos of responsibility in bureaucratic work. Now in educational circles bureaucracy, like management, is often positioned as antithetical to the committed pedagogic work of educators. However, if we look at the work of du Gay, it is precisely those commitments that can be problematic. Du Gay is examining particularly the contemporary shift in the ethos of the UK civil service, but one also sees it in the wider literature on leadership and management. Here Weberian bureaucracy is positioned as getting in the way of enterprise. It becomes central to success for the heart to be on the sleeve in what one does at work, as long of course as this is in line with organisational strategy. A committed and enthusiastic workforce is the goal. This produces partisanship and is usually based upon a view of the future to be mandated and the denial of difference and impossibility.

> Contemporary political demands for responsive public management contain two emotional injunctions to public bureaucrats. The first, derived from populist doctrines of political right, requires bureaucrats to be responsive to the needs of their 'clients'. In the name of 'recognition' and the 'politics of care', for example, it is thought vital to inculcate in bureaucratic conduct a sense of 'compassion' or close identification with others' feelings. Secondly, in the name of responsiveness to political superiors and the delivery of their policy objectives, bureaucrats are expected to exhibit 'ownership' of and identification with particular policies. They are required to be committed champions for and enthusiastic advocates of those policies. (Du Gay 2008, forthcoming)

This may have come from the political right, but is far from being confined to it.

> In discussions of public sector performance… governments of many different political hues have come to the conclusion that Weberian bureaucracy is not a solution but rather a barrier to 'delivery'. In their search for responsive, entrepreneurial forms of public management, party-political governments rail against the obstruction and inertia of conservative bureaucrats, and seek instead to surround themselves with enthusiastic, committed champions of their policies. (Du Gay 2008, forthcoming)

We witness similar tendencies in some of the enthusiasm-based approaches to education also. Institutions are held to be inherently the problem rather than able to contribute to the solution. For instance, thirty years of enthusiastic support for educational initiatives to widen participation to education have had very limited impact and wheels are constantly recreated and funded. I do not deny the intentions of those involved in this work. I have done and continue to do this work myself. Nor do I deny that some goods have been obtained, but is this a responsible way to engage with impossibility? But fundamentalist enthusiasm is not enough, whether it is based on values or usually ill-considered views of evidence.

The ethic of responsibility in Weber takes a different form. For Weber, it is precisely the capacity to work 'without affection or enthusiasm, and without anger or prejudice' that is critical to the work to be undertaken by public official within modern democracies.

> The dominant norms are concepts of straightforward duty without regard to personal considerations. Everyone is subject to formal equality of treatment; that is, everyone in the same empirical situation. This is the spirit in which the ideal official conducts his office. The development of bureaucracy greatly favours the levelling of status, and this can be shown historically to be the normal tendency. Conversely, every social levelling creates a favourable situation for the development of bureaucracy by eliminating the office-holder who rules by virtue of status privileges and the appropriation of the means and powers of administration; in the interests of "equality", it also eliminates those who can hold office on an honorary basis or as an avocation by virtue of their wealth. Everywhere, bureaucracy foreshadows mass democracy... (Weber 1978: 225-226).

For du Gay (2008, forthcoming), the contemporary attempts to formulate enthusiasm-based approaches 'encourages [public officials] to blur distinctions between their sense of self – as a member of a particular religious group, say, or as a partisan advocate of some other collective cause - and the obligations of the office they occupy'. This dispassionate and considered view seems to me more consistent with the view that mandating the future is impossible but also relies precisely on forms of conditionality and fallibility I have been outlining. It is pragmatic in the philosophical sense of the word by contrast with more fundamentalist enthusiasms.

Now, I am not arguing that educators are or should be considered simply as part of the state bureaucracy, although it does concern me at times how people are happy to be employed by the state, but do not engage with the possible implications of this. There is sometimes an irresponsibility here in my view. What I am suggesting is that the ethos of responsibility that Weber argued to be central to the good working of bureaucracy may well have something analogous to tell us in a period in which fundamentalist enthusiasm and commitment is being promulgated from many positions as significant attributes to be developed in and through leadership. It might be said that leadership in this sense only adds to the hiatus and sense of crisis we face rather than responsibly engage with it.

It is in this spirit that I think Gert Biesta's suggestion that we adopt an approach of 'responsibility without knowledge' seems to have resonance. This

> requires that we give up, or at least hold back, all the 'tricks of the trade,' all the wisdom of the world, all national curricula and educational strategies, all recipes for 'what works,' in order to be able to approach newcomers without an agenda or pre-conception, but in a way in which we can ask them what they are bringing to the world. It is in this way that educators take a responsibility for something that they cannot know. It is a responsibility without knowledge. (Biesta, quoted in Fenwick 2008, forthcoming)

Biesta is drawing upon Derrida rather than Weber. Derrida was more concerned with the issue of the impossibility of mandating the future than Weber. Here 'the condition of this thing called responsibility is a certain experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia from which one may invent the only possible invention, the impossible invention' (Derrida 1992b: 41). Invention is not based upon enthusiasm but on the tension in the impossibility of mandating the future. And Fenwick (2008, forthcoming), who is exploring issues of educational responsibility in response to complexity theory, equally suggests

that 'educators might think of doing less rather than more: focus on the immediate, open to possibility, leap into uncertainty, care without knowledge'. Whether such is possible in these performative times is another matter. Such approaches could in a sense model the dispositions that are sought from initiatives such as Curriculum for Excellence, but they rely on a mundane pragmatism rather than some of the more exotic enthusiasms which mark certain educational discourses and practices. This may seem dull, but perhaps it can also be illuminating differently.

(IN)CONCLUSION

Fallibility, conditionality and responsibility. These seem to be ways forward from the notion of education as an impossible practice. They open up possibilities of course, but not on the notion of mandating the future or any fundamentalist enthusiasm about what education can achieve or how it can achieve. They put us all in a position of apprenticeship, whether we are engaged in policy work, teaching, leading, or researching. And perhaps they are necessary if we are to sustain and develop modest democratic practices and the institutional practices to support them. Perhaps then some worthwhile things would be possible… What do you think?

NOTE

This article is based upon a Keynote Address at the Annual Conference of the Scottish Educational Research Association, Perth, November 2007.

REFERENCES

Biesta, G. (1998) Say you want a revolution…. Suggestions for the impossible future of critical pedagogy, *Educational Theory,* 48(4), 499-510

Biesta, G. (2004) Against learning: Reclaiming a language for education in an age of learning, *Nordisk Pedogogik*, 24(1), 70-82

Bowker, G. & Star, S (2000) *Sorting things out*, Harvard: Harvard University Press

Derrida, J. (1992a) Afterw.rds: or, at least, less than a letter about a letter less. In N. Royle (ed.) *Afterwords*, Tampere: Outside Books

Derrida, J. (1992b) *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Du Gay, P. (2008, forthcoming) '"Without affection or enthusiasm": problems of attachment and involvement in 'responsive' public management', *Organization*.

Edwards, R. & Usher, R. (2001) Lifelong learning: a postmodern condition of education?, *Adult Education Quarterly*, 51(4), 273-87

Fenwick, T. (2008, forthcoming) 'Responsibility, complexity science and education: dilemmas and uncertain responses', *Studies in Philosophy of Education*

Foucault, M. (2001) *Fearless speech*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)

Law, J. (2004) *After method: Mess in social science research*, London: Routledge

Osberg, D. & Biesta, G. (2007) Beyond presence: epistemological and pedagogical implications of 'strong' emergence, *Interchange*, 38(1), 31-51

Rikowski, G. (1999) Nietzsche, Marx and mastery: The learning unto death. In P. Ainley & H. Rainbird (eds.) *Apprenticeship: Towards a new paradigm for learning*, London: Kogan Page

Strathern, M. (2000) (ed.) *Audit cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy*, London: Routledge

Stonach, I. & MacLure, M. (1997) *Educational Research Undone*: the Postmodern Embrace, Buckingham: Open University Press

Weber, M. (1978) *Economy & Society* (2 Vols.), Los Angeles: University of California Press