Changing Teacher Roles, Identities and Professionalism (C – TRIP)

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Research-based Teaching

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Historical Context
The idea of ‘research-based teaching’ (see Stenhouse 1975 and 1979a) emerged in the context of Lawrence Stenhouse’s Humanities Curriculum Project (1967-72). The project, jointly funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the Schools Council for Curriculum Reform and Examinations, was briefed to address the problem of large-scale disaffection from learning the humanities subjects on the part of students, deemed to be of average to below-average academic ability, as they approached the school leaving age at a time when it was about to be raised from 15-16 years (see Stenhouse 1968, 1971).

Why then did the idea of research-based teaching arise as part of the curriculum solution Stenhouse proposed to a problem situation confronting teachers of the humanities – widespread student disaffection – which threatened to reach a crisis point with the raising of the school leaving age? It did so because the curriculum solution was cast in the form of a pedagogical experiment. He re-described the objects of learning in the humanities as those human
acts and social situations that posed controversial value issues concerning the conduct of human affairs, and proceeded to categorise curriculum content in these terms e.g. ‘War and Society’, ‘The Family’, ‘Relations between the Sexes’, ‘Poverty’, ‘Law and Order’. This was a significant departure from objects of learning that had been largely conceived in terms of factual knowledge, and for Stenhouse had radical implications for pedagogy. It implied a shift away from a traditional instruction-based towards a more discussion-based pedagogy. Since the professional knowledge of humanities teachers was largely confined to knowing how to teach factual knowledge the realisation of discussion-based classrooms would require a great deal of pedagogical experimentation on their part in order to develop new knowledge. Hence, the idea of ‘research-based teaching’.

This idea was inextricably linked to the pedagogical innovation in classrooms that was required to enact student’s engagement with newly cast objects of learning. This curriculum change context is important (see Stenhouse 1975). Stenhouse did not associate pedagogical innovation and research-based teaching with mere refinements and improvements in teachers’ technical knowledge about how to transmit traditional subject matter. Research-based teaching implied a more radical shift in the conceptualisation of the objects of learning that constitute a curriculum. Moreover, it implied a different view of the relationship between these objects and the teaching-learning process. Whereas instructional processes are contingently related as means to the learning outcomes they are intended to bring about, in the discussion-based classroom learning outcomes will be inherently unpredictable and variable. The objects of learning – human acts and situations – are appropriately objects of free and open discussion between people holding different evaluative outlooks. In the course of learning through discussion individuals will modify and extend their understanding of acts and situations as they examine them in the light of each
other’s evaluative outlook as well as their own. Mutual learning in the form of a growth of understanding takes place, but what this growth consists of cannot be predicted in advance of the process. Nor can it be presumed that the process will necessarily result in the elimination of all individual differences in understanding. Through open and free discussion participants may arrive at understandings which reflect a greater degree of over-lapping consensus (see Rawls 1993, 1996) while at the same time differing in some respects.

The unpredictability of, and variation in, the development of understanding through discussion implies that it cannot be assessed against a single metric or standard that is defined in advance of the process. For Stenhouse the quality of discussion can only be defined in terms of standards that are internal to the process. It was standards defined in these terms that the teacher had responsibility for, such as ensuring that students had freedom to express their views regardless of majority opinion, that they were open to views that differed from their own, and that they had regard for reasons and evidence in defending their views and critiquing those of others. Standards like these cannot be defined independently of the learning process since they define what is to count as worthwhile discussion.

Research-based teaching was viewed by Stenhouse as a form of research that focuses on over-coming the difficulties of achieving high quality discussion in classrooms, given the norms that have traditionally shaped practice in them. For him, the transformation of the culture of teaching and learning that prevailed in the field of humanities education, and which he believed to be the primary source of students disaffection, depends upon the capacity of teachers to adopt a research stance towards their practice. He did not view this capacity in purely individualistic terms. Cultural transformation depends on teachers collaborating together across classrooms and schools to identify and diagnose common problems
they experience in attempting to realise the standards implied by the pedagogical aim of developing understanding - given that their practice tends to be shaped by shared norms - and to devise experimental strategies for resolving them. Research-based teaching depends on the willingness of individual teachers to open up their practice to scrutiny by others. It therefore presupposes the possibility of discerning shared problems and solutions in common across a wide range of classroom contexts. Such common discernments strengthen and reinforce the capacity of individuals to adopt a research stance towards their teaching.

Research-based teaching and the generalisability of findings. However, generalisations in the context of research-based teaching takes a different form to those that issue from the kind of teacher effectiveness research that is now being promoted as a basis for ‘evidence-based teaching.’ Teacher effectiveness research abstracts variables from particular contexts of practice in order to discover co-relational regularities between them that can be couched in terms of statistical probabilities. Its findings are then used as evidence in support of claims that “if teachers do X rather than Y in their professional practice, there will be a significant and enduring improvement of outcome” (see Hargreaves 1997). The aspiration is to furnish teachers with general principles for rationally determining what will in all probability be the most instrumentally effective means of bringing about the desired learning outcomes. The cost of this kind of generalisation is a loss of information about the particularities of teaching situations that teachers need to take into account in developing their teaching strategies. The extent to which a particular generalisation applies in their particular circumstances remains a question to be answered. It can be argued that it is here that the idea of ‘research-based teaching’ is relevant. Indeed Stenhouse himself argued that in order for teachers to use research findings of this kind intelligently
teachers needed to research the particularities of their classroom situations (1979b).

However, this is not to deny that the primary context in which Stenhouse developed the idea of research-based teaching was that of a curriculum innovation where he deemed it inappropriate for teachers to evaluate their teaching in terms of its instrumentality as a means of achieving pre-determined learning outcomes. In this context ‘standards’ refers not so much to measures of learning outcomes as to qualities that are inherent in the process of ‘developing understanding’ through discussion. Here the pedagogical aim cannot be specified independently of the learning process by which it is realised. In this context the appropriate focus for research is the ethical consistency of teachers interventions with the process standards implied by the pedagogical aim. For example, Stenhouse regarded situations in classrooms where teachers used their authority position in the classroom to promote their personal views, or where they failed to protect divergence in discussion or allowed a student to disregard reasons and evidence that supported a different view to their own, as ethically inconsistent with the standards inherent in the process of developing understanding.

In the Humanities Project teachers were asked to collaborate with the external team in systematically identifying, in and across classrooms, patterns of interaction with and between students that were inconsistent with the standards implied by the project’s pedagogical aim. This was done by studying triangulation data drawn from observations and recordings, from teachers’ self-accounts and from students’ accounts of their experience in the classroom. Teachers were then asked to adopt and test a set of experimental teaching strategies designed to change the salient patterns of classroom interaction into ones that are more consistent with the pedagogical aim of the project. For example, one common pattern that was identified involved the teacher asking students
whether they agreed with a particular point of view expressed in the group. Students invariably interpreted this pattern as ‘pressurising for consensus’ around a view endorsed by the teacher, and tended to respond with silence. Teachers were then asked to test the ‘action hypothesis’ that divergence in discussion is best protected if they refrain from asking “Do you agree?” and instead ask “Does anyone disagree?” Those ‘action hypotheses’ that were confirmed by the majority of teachers were then incorporated into a set of general findings that other teachers of controversial issues in the humanities were invited to test and further develop in their particular classroom settings. As a body of new professional knowledge to support curriculum change teachers presented the project’s generalisations as provisional and open to continuous re-assessment. Their role was not so much to prescribe practice as to build capacity for research-based teaching on a sustainable basis within a curriculum field.

The difference between the kinds of generalisation that issue from teacher effectiveness research and those that issue from research-based teaching is well captured in Martha Nussbaum’s (1990) distinction between general and universal principles. A general principle, Nussbaum argues, not only covers many cases, “it applies to them in virtue of some rather non-concrete characteristics.” In other words it originates from a process of abstraction from the particularities of time and circumstance. Universal principles, on the other hand, apply to all particular cases “that are in the relevant ways similar.” Nussbaum argues that the latter may play an important role in practical reason without being prior to particular situations of choice. She views them as summaries of good concrete judgements in situations that are similar in all relevant respects. As such they are useful as guides to perception; to discerning the practically/ethically relevant features of particular concrete and complex situations that tend to repeat themselves from one situation to another. This is quite different from the normative function of general principles as “the
ultimate authorities against which the correctness of particular choices is assessed”. Universal principles, captured in summaries of good concrete judgements in similar cases, represent the ‘voice of concrete practical experience’. Yet at the same time they open one to the experience of surprise. Our capacity to recognise the unique and novel features of a case that are nevertheless ethically significant depends on our use of universal ‘rules of thumb’. In other words a capacity to recognise the unanticipated depends on the anticipations provided by universal principles. Viewed in this light the generalisations about teaching and learning that issue from research-based teaching, and that are grounded in the comparison of cases, support reflection about the complex particularities of life in classrooms. Even in a situation where they are found not to apply they nevertheless have the important function of sensitising the teacher to practically relevant features of that situation. From the standpoint of Stenhouse's idea of research-based teaching there is no contradiction involved in the use of a case study approach and the search for generalisations about teaching and learning. The often expressed view that one cannot generalise from case study research stems from a notion of generalisation that is restricted to the search for general as opposed to universal principles.

Research-based teaching as a generic approach to curriculum reform
Stenhouse did not confine the idea of ‘research-based teaching’ to the teaching of value-issues. He argued that the concepts and theories that shape and under-pin factual knowledge are always in principle contestable and this renders all such knowledge open to questioning. Hence, any curriculum reform that re-defines the objects of learning in terms of the key concepts and theories of a discipline also implies a pedagogical shift in the direction of more discussion-based learning that will require a great deal of research-based teaching. Stenhouse’s vision of curriculum reform was ultimately grounded in a general epistemological stance, a view of
knowledge – whether it be ethical knowledge or knowledge of empirical facts – as provisional and open to questioning and discussion. Such a vision radically challenged the epistemological assumptions that underpin traditional curriculum structures as classifications of indubitable truths for the purpose of authoritative transmission. The idea of research-based teaching therefore presumed a backdrop of shifting conceptions of educational knowledge and pedagogical aims. Via such a process – that fused teaching and research – teachers could develop new professional knowledge and skills that would enable them to meaningfully engage students with new objects of learning. For Stenhouse the professional development of teachers was inextricably linked to curriculum development at the level of the classroom and research-based teaching forged the linkage between them.

Shifting conceptions of educational knowledge were embedded in a number of curriculum development projects sponsored by the Schools Council for Curriculum Reform and Examinations during its lifetime (see Plaskow 1985). These projects, however, failed to make explicit the standards inherent in the teaching and learning process that was being advocated as the context of use for their curriculum materials. It was assumed that general notions of pedagogical aims, such as ‘inquiry’ or ‘discovery’ learning provided sufficient direction for teachers. In 1972 the Ford Foundation awarded me a grant to work with teachers engaged in a number of curriculum reforms to develop a cross-curricula pedagogy for Inquiry/Discovery Learning. In doing so Clem Adelman and I involved teachers in a process of clarifying these pedagogical aims and the process values and principles or standards they implied (see Elliott 1976-77). An overlapping consensus evolved around the view that these aims obliged the teacher to protect and foster a process of self-directed learning. We suggested to teachers that this implied giving students the freedom to:
identify and initiate their own questions for inquiry;

express their own ideas and develop them into hypotheses;

test their ideas and hypotheses against relevant evidence;

subject all ideas, including those of the teacher, to discussion and rational scrutiny

and placed teachers under obligations to protect these freedoms by refraining from imposing constraints on their exercise and to positively foster the capabilities that enabled students to exercise them when they had the opportunity. These obligations were then specified in some detail and categorised into a negative and a positive set of standards or principles governing the teacher’s role in the learning process; the former spelt out obligations to refrain from imposing constraints on self-directed learning (e.g. on students access to relevant evidence) while the latter spelt out obligations to foster capabilities for self-directed learning (e.g. the ability to evaluate evidence).

The values and procedural principles of the Ford Teaching Project provided teachers engaged in curriculum reform with a framework for developing their teaching through research. In the light of it they were able to identify constraints they imposed in common on their students freedom to direct their own learning, and to experiment with strategies for removing them and replacing them with strategies that were more consistent with this pedagogical aim. They also developed and tested action hypothesis about ways in which they could positively intervene in the learning process to foster their students capability at directing their own learning. At the end of the project participating teachers chose to use the framework of values and principles as a basis for systematically organising their general findings about the problems of realising an inquiry/discovery learning process in classroom settings and
strategies for resolving them. These findings were couched in the form of diagnostic and action hypotheses for other teachers engaged in curriculum reform to test in their classrooms.

Research-based teaching as the linkage between theory and practice
Stenhouse’s idea of research-based teaching emerged as a way of linking the world of the educational theorist in the university with that of the teacher. It is the means by which the development of theory is disciplined by the problems of practice and places theorists under an obligation to translate their ideas into a form that can be tested in practice. Stenhouse viewed a curriculum in these terms, as a translation of ideas in practical form. He wrote (1980):

_Only in curricular form can ideas be tested by teachers. Curricula are hypothetical procedures testable only in classrooms. All educational ideas must find expression in curricula before we can tell whether they are day dreams or contributions to practice. Many educational ideas are not found wanting, because they cannot be found at all._

The Humanities Project was itself designed as a practical expression of an educational theory he had first articulated in his book *Culture and Education* (1967). Teachers did not have to read the book to engage with the theory, for it was embedded in his design of the humanities curriculum (see Elliott 1983). Moreover, this curriculum was designed in a way that enabled teachers to engage with his idea’s critically through research-based teaching.

Research-based teaching then for Stenhouse not only involved collaboration between teachers but also with educational theorists in the university sector. Busy teachers needed theorists as a source of new ideas and theorists needed teachers to test and develop them further. The bridges between the two worlds of theory and practice were to be curricular that opened up spaces for teachers to
re-theorise their practice and theorists to practicalise their theories through research-based teaching. The problem with many curricula designed by academics in the light of shifting conceptions of educational knowledge and the process of learning is that they did not go far enough in building the bridge between theory and practice. It was a problem that the Ford Teaching Project tried to address retrospectively through its framework of process values and principles, long after many curricula had passed the design and materials production stage. By this time the Schools Council’s curriculum reform programme was beginning to be subjected to criticism on the grounds that many projects appeared to have low levels of uptake within the school system and impact on classroom practice. In my view this was partly do to the dominance of the Research, Development and Diffusion model in shaping the Council’s change strategy. This left little space for the integration of curriculum research and development at the level of the school through research-based teaching. The outcome was a failure of projects to demonstrate how the ideals and theories that underpinned them might be translated into concrete classroom practice. If the design of many of these projects had followed Stenhouse and provided more support for research-based teaching the curriculum reform movement of the 60’s and 70’s in this country might have become more sustainable. In which case it would not have been so easily replaced in the late 80’s by a state-driven, outcomes-based and highly prescriptive national curriculum. Although this curriculum remains officially in place to day it has become a somewhat ‘crumbling shrine’, particularly in the upper secondary.

We are possibly on the verge of a new curriculum development movement that will give the teaching profession a more generative role and open up a space for research-based teaching of a kind that is not too far removed from the conception that emerged in the 60’s and 70’s. We can still witness a similar conception operating in parts of the globe; one striking example being that of Hong
Kong. There the post-changeover from British colonial rule in 1997 saw the emergence of a national curriculum framework of aims, values and principles that gave spaces for teachers to play a generative role in developing curriculum programmes in their schools that are disciplined by the problems of practice (see HK Curriculum Development Council 2001). It is therefore hardly surprising that the idea of research-based teaching, not dissimilar to the one envisaged by Stenhouse, has re-emerged in this context.

**Different trajectories of meaning: ‘research-based teaching’ and ‘practitioner research’**

The ‘teachers as researchers’ movement in this country persists but has been conceptually re-shaped by an outcomes-based national curriculum and the ‘science of measurement’ associated with it. What is now known as ‘practitioner research’ tends to be understood as an inquiry that may be carried out by individual teachers into how to drive up standards in their classroom. ‘Standards’ in this context refer to what standardised tests of attainment measure rather than qualities inherent in learning processes that are deemed to be educationally worthwhile in themselves. ‘Practitioner Research’ of this kind is shaped by an objectivist and instrumentalist rationality as opposed to the deliberative and democratic rationality embedded in the idea of research-based teaching to improve the ethical quality of teacher’s interactions with students in the teaching-learning process. This transformation of teacher research into a form of techne has not proceeded independently of any contribution from higher education. An ESRC funded study I directed in the mid-90’s, of action-research in the context of Master’s Degree’s in Education, provided evidence of the extent to which an instrumental rationality was shaping teachers’ research at post-graduate level.

‘Practitioner research’ is viewed as a form of inquiry carried out by teachers, on their own or sometimes with peers’, rather than as part of a collaborative process of curriculum development between
groups of teachers and educational thinkers in the university, Academics may provide consultancy support with research methods but the relationship is no longer that of a curriculum development partnership. Both educational academics and the teaching profession have become cast out of the curriculum field. Whereas curriculum development provided a context for the idea of ‘research-based’ teaching this context no longer exists for the practitioner-researcher who has little generative role in this area. Her role is to implement and deliver a prescribed curriculum rather than to test a curriculum against the problems of practice and contribute to its further development.

Finally, ‘practitioner research’ is not seen to be at tension with teacher effectiveness research and the associated idea of evidence-based teaching. The kinds of small-scale research based on single case studies that ‘practitioner research’ is expected to yield are regarded as complementary to teacher effectiveness research. It is the task of the latter to yield generalisations in the form of statistical probabilities and the task of the former to explore their application and usefulness in particular cases.

The idea of ‘research-based teaching’ carries a set of meanings that practitioner research has cast off in the course of its successful adaptation to the logic of instrumental rationality that currently prevails in education in this country. It has accomplished a marriage of convenience with a different paradigm of educational science, and a wide measure of acceptance and support in the policy context. However, the problem of disaffection from learning remains on a grand scale. The time may soon come when new curriculum solutions are required to the social engineering that has characterised the past decade and a half. The idea of ‘research-based teaching’ expounded in this paper may shortly re-emerge and be embraced by the teaching profession on a larger scale than before. After all teachers have learned a bitter lesson in recent
years concerning how the profession needs to position itself to meet the challenges of educational reform.

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