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## The Culture of Teaching

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**ABSTRACT** Education is characterised by marked and damaging schisms among its specialties, especially between classroom practitioners and academic members of the profession. While many or most commentators accept this rift as arising from real and significant differences between the groups, this article argues that the schism can be seen as the consequence of the reduced status of education as an institution. Mary Douglas's cultural theory is utilised to explore ways in which low status pushes any institution, education included, towards the world-view of a cult or sect. The origins of aspects of contemporary educational thought that attract considerable criticism from 'outside' are traced to thought styles that are typical of a cult. The suggestion is made that continuing criticism that further erodes education's status will not lead to desired change but instead entrench practitioners' stance of resistance to demands that originate from outside the profession.

We are all familiar with the blind spot that obscures our own cultural nature from us: we, we would maintain, have sensible, rational, evidence-based approaches to the world; the others, in contrast, are prisoners of their culture. Or their ideology: as Clifford Geertz observes, 'I have a social philosophy, you have political opinions, he has an ideology' (cited in Douglas, 2004). Culture, however, does not end at the boundaries of our Western nation-states, and our perceptions, beliefs, values and fears are as much cultural products as those that are characteristic of any other human society. Understanding how culture shapes our thinking can provide a useful means for making sense of seemingly disconnected collections of problems and issues. In this article I make use of cultural theory to explore and explain some aspects of how education as an institution 'thinks'; that is, how those persons who make up the education community come to understand and explain the world in certain ways via their participation in and co-creation of the culture of education. Issues I explore include the so-called theory-practice divide; the Balkanisation of education and teachers' professional identity.

### Theory versus Practice

An enduring theme in discussions about teaching is the supposed divide between theory and practice, theory usually represented by education's academic arm and practice by its classroom teachers. From the classroom practitioner's perspective this divide is accompanied by something quite close to disdain for the academic arm, peopled, as it is said to be, by the 'out of touch' inhabitants of 'ivory towers'. Academic educators, on the other hand, express impatience with the purported dearth of teaching practice informed by the outcomes of educational research, and consequently a good deal of energy is expended by academics on discussing ways to solve the problem of how to persuade teachers to make professional use of research findings.

This supposed division between theory and practice is thus taken as a real feature of the education universe. The culprits responsible for it will be found on the other side of the professional chasm to oneself: 'out of touch academics', in which case the call is to make research 'more relevant' or to better communicate the results of research that is conducted, or teachers who

are uninterested in or unaware of the research that does exist, in which case the solution is to demand 'evidence-based practice'.

### Teachers and Unteachers

Those who work in faculties of education have by and large previously worked as school teachers. It can come as a painful surprise to discover that this experience counts for nothing in many practitioners' eyes and that one is still regarded as 'out of touch' and having little of use or interest to say about classroom teaching. It would be a rare education faculty member who has never been confronted with the question, 'when was the last time you were in a classroom?' The irony is that this challenge is often made in a university classroom, but such classrooms 'don't count' and the teaching that is conducted in them is not 'real teaching'.

Stories are rife of novice education academics, six weeks out of their last school teaching appointment, being thus confronted and even of people being pronounced by their school colleagues to be 'out of touch' when they merely indicated that they planned to make a career move that would take them away from the classroom. It would appear that it is not possible to be a former teacher. Rather, leaving the school teaching profession makes one an 'unteacher', someone who has revealed that he or she was never really a teacher by his or her 'defection' from the ranks.

The low opinion of academic educators is extended by many teachers to all who have ever been classroom teachers and moved on to some other even very closely related educational specialty, including school principal. It seems from these observations that the issue is one of teachers' identity, and in an attempt to clarify the processes at work I conducted research into teachers' occupational identity.

Work conducted in the social psychological paradigm Self Categorisation Theory (SCT: Turner, 1985; Turner et al, 1987; Oakes et al, 1994) demonstrates that occupational self-conceptions are social identifications, and as such are defined comparatively in terms of the perceived characteristics of relevant alternative occupational categories. Occupational – or any other – stereotypes are not fanciful in their content but based on fact. What is of significance, however, is the differential value that is placed on these facts.

Whilst educators may define themselves as a single group in comparison with nurses or accountants, within the education system – the context of performance of their professional roles – more finely grained comparisons distinguish each group from others within that context and provide the social psychological content of specific occupational group identities. Although varying in detail or form of expression across perceivers, these contextually defined self-stereotypes tend to consensuality through the interactive processes of within-group reference and between-group comparison. This is the essence of social identities: they are at once socially shared and personally meaningful.

For teachers the central fact that defines their occupational identity is that their work is performed in classrooms (Brooks & Scott, 2000). Other groups may work with children or within schools or other educational settings but only teachers work in classrooms. This becomes the defining difference between teachers and other closely related occupations and therefore it is also the badge of their special merit. It is no accident, then, that the hapless university teacher is confronted with the demand to know how long it is since he or she was 'in a classroom'.

Hargreaves (1994) and other commentators have noted the extent to which inter-group comparison is particularly marked in the teaching profession, leading to what he calls 'Balkanisation', and my own research has confirmed this. For example, primary teachers define themselves as differing in important ways from secondary teachers, especially in that they 'teach' children while secondary teachers 'teach subjects', letting the demands of the subject override concern for children's individual welfare. Secondary teachers, on the other hand, regard themselves as equally interested in student welfare and as concerned with nurturing the individual child as primary teachers. However, within individual secondary schools there may be considerable rivalry and even hostility between faculties.

Both primary and secondary teachers, however, unite in their contempt for those who are 'refugees from the classroom', which includes school principals and school psychologists/counsellors, other 'outsiders', such as educational consultants and administrators and, particularly,

academic educators. All these reveal themselves, in contrast to classroom teachers, as being not interested in or capable of dealing directly with students in the context of the classroom. Instead they are suspected of being motivated by power and prestige, leading them to become 'escapees' from the classroom by means of advancement or specialisation (Brooks & Scott, 2000).

Education is perhaps the only profession in which there is a marked divide between its practitioner and academic arms and so much 'Balkanisation' within its ranks. Academic physicians, lawyers, engineers and architects are not regarded by the relevant practitioners as 'out of touch' and having nothing to say about the conduct of the work of their profession, nor are those who move into specialisations or seek promotion scorned in quite the same way. Similarly, practitioners are not regarded as almost universally change-shy and resistant to new knowledge emerging from research in their fields. Quite commonly academics in other professions will also be practitioners, which certainly assists in preventing an 'us versus them' attitude emerging.

### **Cultural Theory**

While social psychological techniques have proved useful to explore occupational identity, there are plainly deeper forces at work shaping teachers' conceptions of their occupational realm. Those who are aware of the education professional divide and reflect on it often attribute it to the low status of teaching [1] and, by extension, of its academic arm. There is no doubt that in the anglophone world education and its practitioners have suffered a decline in status over the last few decades and that teachers are acutely aware of this reduction in standing (Scott et al, 2001). Bourdieu (1998) has styled this decline as the consequence of a deliberate attack by the governments of nation-states on the power and status of the professions that compose what he calls the Left Hand of the state, including education but all those that deal with people and what could be styled 'welfare' issues. There has been a consequent shifting of resources, money and prestige to the Right Hand (banks, treasuries and all who deal with money rather than people).

### **Cults and Sects**

The phenomenon of the unteacher on whom anathema is pronounced for his or her defection from the group also indicates that the thinking that underlies these attitudes has a close affinity to that typical of cults or sects. In other words, teachers who have left the classroom are like defectors from radical political groups or those who leave fringe religious sects. Indeed, the cultural theory of Mary Douglas (1986) would suggest that this derives from the drop in social standing of the education profession; that is, that an institution that is deprived of status, influence and recognition, and is relegated to the margins of the social enterprise, will adopt the cultural characteristics of a cult.

According to Douglas there are four cultural tendencies that account for the rich variety of cultural forms that have evolved across time and space. Douglas calls her theory 'grid-group theory' and placement on the two dimensions determines in which of the resulting quadrants any society, group or institution will fall. 'Grid' refers to the rules that 'constrain and separate individuals' while 'group' refers to 'the rules that incorporate people into groups' (Douglas, 2004, p. 95). Entities that are high on both dimension Douglas calls hierarchies; those that are high on 'group' but low on 'grid' are cults or sects; individualist entities are characterised by being low on both, while those that are high on regulation – 'grid' – but on low on social incorporation are the preserve of the dispossessed and isolated who have left or been pushed out of mainstream society.

All four cultural tendencies exist in every group or society. As Douglas (2004) notes:

A community at any one time is constituted, not by one, but by four distinctive cultural tendencies. They are not separate cultures, they are tendencies or biases, or some call them 'forms of solidarity' ... They constitute the community as a four-fold cultural unit engaged in a continuous internal dialogue. (p. 92)

Each cultural tendency has a distinct pattern of beliefs, values and concerns. Stances on issues of common societal interest are determined by the cultural tendency of the observer. Hierarchists stand for a system ordered by 'authority, precedent, rules and defined statuses' (Douglas, 2004, p. 92). Individual freedom may be compromised by the restraints imposed in the name of social

order but hierarchical systems provide security for their members. The individualist tendency, on the other hand, is competitive in essence and strives for the least number of restraints on individual action and the lowest possible level of incorporation into the group. Tradition is a burden and the aim is to maintain loose and ephemeral ties of individual convenience rather than enduring patterns of interaction and relating. Opportunity and freedom abound but so does risk, as individuals are regarded as rising or falling on their own merits.

These two tendencies form the 'positive diagonal' of the society and contest for its control. They both loathe and need each other: individualists need hierarchists to perform the necessary stewardship roles of the society, especially the redistribution of resources that contains the worse depredation of the market, while individualists are needed for the vibrancy they bring and the counterpoint they provide to too much bureaucracy and a tendency to over-governance.

Cults or sects are low in regulation, wary of authority and authority structures but high on incorporation of members into the group. Put another way, belonging, defined as a voluntary act, is all. Egalitarian by instinct, these groups exist on the edges of society, acting as its conscience, advocating for the oppressed and excluded and warning of risks that threaten the whole society but which may be 'below the radar' of the two ruling cultural tendencies. Religious sects, protest movements and environmental activists are all examples.

The isolates are the dwellers in the last quadrant. They lack power, prestige and personal resources of all kinds, which means that while they are subject to restraints on the conduct of their lives, they are also marginalised and not incorporated into meaningful groups or indeed society as a whole. They have little voice and few who are interested in what they might have to say. They see no way out of their predicament and thus they are apathetic and fatalistic: they consequently are liable to be blamed for their victimhood, which, it is supposed, emanates from their 'lack of motivation'.

Each cultural tendency has a distinct pattern of beliefs and values that determines its world-view, its model of personhood and thus the conduct of its members. This conduct in its turn acts to reinforce the group's models and world-view. These are internally consistent but mutually exclusive: one cannot hold the world-view of the individualist, say, while also advocating for the egalitarian, corporatist belief system of a cult or sect. One must be one or the other. As I have noted above, teaching as an institution displays the thought styles (Douglas, 1996) of a cult or sect and I shall concentrate on those characteristics.

Douglas (1986) maintains that the thought styles of an institution will be strongly correlated with, not to say determined by, its relationship to the heads of power in a society. Distance from the 'centre', whether voluntary, as with protest movements of all kinds, or otherwise will be associated with particular thought styles. If group affiliation/incorporation is lacking, being on the margin of things will push people towards the fate of the isolates. On the other hand, possession of a common purpose and identity will push marginalised groups towards the world-view of the cult or sect.[2]

### Insiders and Outsiders

Sects are suspicious of authority structures and hierarchies of all sorts: they believe that power really does corrupt. Lack of strong mechanisms of authority to control their membership means that sects are always threatened with defection from their numbers, with potential for the decline and demise of the group. Without a set of formal sanctions to punish potential defectors, sects resort to obsession with boundaries, that is, with defining who is and is not a member of the group, via the creation of a joint world-view and a set of personal and moral criteria for membership. Criteria for membership are strict and not open for negotiation. The resulting model of the universe as composed of virtuous insiders and vice-ridden outsiders leads to a particularly black and white ethical code. It is also the source of the tendency for sects to be prone to schism when the faithful find themselves disagreeing about the precepts of the cult's belief system. With no formal structures to arbitrate between differing conceptions of the good the only recourse is for the dissidents to leave.

The Manichean world-view to which sects are prone also explains why the groups that are most despised are not the remote inhabitants of the other cultural tendencies but those whose

membership is composed of defectors from the sect: Stalinists hated Trotskyists most of all, and vice versa. This anathema is the punishment for leaving and the means by which current members are persuaded not to defect, lest they too find themselves despised and derided like the traitors that have abandoned righteousness. This explains why classroom teachers are so scathing of other educational specialties: principals, school counsellors, education academics are all defectors from the ranks of the true believers. The black and white world-view applies most strongly in this circumstance and the traitors cannot have anything of value to say on the matter of being a teacher, declaring as they have by their defection that they are in effect 'unteachers'. Indeed, university teachers are, it is maintained, not teachers at all. The meaning of 'out of touch' is, then, simply 'out', as in not one of us.

This leads to all sorts of issues alluded to already, especially the reluctance to accept that academic educators might have anything of value to say about teaching. In its extreme form it can result in pre-service teachers on professional placements encountering the demand that they 'forget everything they've told you at university' and learn the trade from the true experts, classroom teachers. Not belonging is a painful experience and most accede to conformity with the existing culture of teaching, as evidenced by this observation from a student:

It has been my experience that older, wiser, exemplary teachers listen politely to the 'newest' teaching techniques, and continue doing what they know works. When 'new' teaching techniques come to the fore, I try these also, but often find them woefully ineffective. I think that neuroscientists may understand brains and how they work, but they do not understand teaching or behaviour of students. For this reason, while I found [the course textbook] interesting and informative, and may have a bearing on my understanding students better, I think my educational practices are better informed by effective teachers whose techniques have proven themselves [*sic*] to be of worth (Master of Education candidate, female, mid twenties)

The disparagement of closely affiliated outsiders even extends among some teachers to those who aspire to enter the teaching profession. Pre-service teachers are routinely portrayed as deficient in all regards and incapable of performing even the most basic teacherly duties. This denigration serves the double purpose of further calling attention to the general uselessness of those out of touch dwellers in ivory towers, teacher educators, who cannot teach even the most basic of classroom skills. However, this criticism of pre-service teachers also sets the stage for what Dinham has called the 'Christmas miracle' (Dinham, 2006).

### **Communication Patterns and Cultural Tendencies**

Information is never simply information and each cultural tendency has means of dealing with 'news from the outside'. While we may regard information that comes from our corner of the cultural quartet as purely fact and the consequences that flow from it self-evident, this is far from the case. To maintain this is not to lapse into relativism but merely to observe that the differing cultural tendencies deal with information in their own ways. In the culture of both the isolates and individualists the flow of information is uncontrolled and is consequently, Douglas maintains (2004, p. 96), 'full of noise and triviality'. Individualists do not favour censorship, representing as it does an infringement of personal liberty far worse than a public culture clogged with dross and cacophony.

In comparison, for the two corporatist cultures, the hierarchies and the sects, controlling incoming information is a major concern. Hierarchies sort information according to who has a 'right to know', and not all information is released to all members, leading to criticisms from without of 'lack of transparency' and 'unaccountability'. For the members of a sect, however, it is the source of information that is the basis for its reliability and acceptability. Does it come from one of our own or someone known to be sympathetic to us? Then it will be accepted and acted upon. If, however, it comes from someone beyond the pale, it will be rejected as untrue and unreliable.

For teachers, evidence is not simply evidence. Calls for evidence-based practice are made from the position that it is obvious what constitutes evidence, that practice based on it is necessarily superior and that to fail to act on it is to reveal oneself as somehow deficient, resistant to change or progress, irrational even. However, to teachers, so-called-evidence derived from the research activities of the despised academic arm of the profession is an unreliable guide to practice, while the

opinions of their peers is a trustworthy source of information, as my student observed, above. 'Research shows' carries no weight as a reason to do things differently, indicating as it does that the information conveyed is just another bit of theory, of 'academic' interest only.

### **On Not Making Distinctions**

As noted, cults of all sorts are egalitarian in their outlook and suspicious of power structures of all sorts. A particular threat to egalitarian value systems is unequal distribution of resources and the resentment and jealousy that arises. Sects consequently must have good mechanisms in place to manage envy and often have mores that prohibit displays of individuality or personal achievements and wealth, or the creation of any distinctions among the faithful.

In Australia this envy management has taken the form of maintaining stridently that all teachers are the same; all are equally virtuous. This means that once a pre-service teacher has crossed the threshold and entered the profession suddenly she or he is free of the defects and deficiencies so evident a scant few weeks before. The school year starts in January in Australia, thus this transformation from defective outsider to virtuous insider occurs during the Christmas break, a result, no doubt, of the miracle upon which Dinham has commented.

Refusal by teachers to countenance distinctions among their ranks has made admission of the existence of poorly performing teachers forbidden. An 'attack', as in unfavourable comment upon, one teacher is interpreted as an assault on the entire profession even though teachers know privately that some of their number are ineffective or worse. Similarly, any positive distinction is resisted and awards for good teaching are regarded with hostility. I was involved in establishing one such award system in the state in which I lived and worked, and the early stages of the process were marked by resistance and attempts to undermine it (Dinham, 2002). Even after it was functioning many schools refused to participate on the grounds that 'All teachers are wonderful, they should all get an award', to use the words of a staff member from one such school.

As well as suspicion of and opposition to award systems the egalitarian value system typical of the teaching profession forbids displays of personal ambition, characterised as craving power and distinction. As noted above, the teachers with whom I researched occupational identity regarded those who had left the classroom to pursue an educational specialty, such as administration or counselling, as motivated by an unacceptable desire to 'stand out', while covertly admitting to their own incapacity as classroom teachers.

This refusal to make distinctions or, alternatively, this strong commitment to egalitarianism spills over into teachers' attitudes to teaching, with a strong dislike of singling out children to be 'winners' at the 'expense' of their school mates. This 'all must have prizes' (Phillips, 1998) attitude has earned the particular ire of individualists, whose meritocratic belief system stands in opposition to such 'coddling'. In consequence, the spokesperson for competitive individualism heaps condemnation on teachers for their refusal to 'let school imitate life', that is, let the children fight it out to decide who is top dog, academically and otherwise.

### **Harms and Dangers**

The cultural tendencies differ in the definition of harm and the dangers they fear as much as they differ about any other aspect of human existence (Douglas, 1996). What constitutes a danger to human well-being is derived from the models of the person to which each tendency subscribes. Individualists, as an example, regard people as resilient and risks as a necessary and welcome part of life: without risk-taking there is no progress or possibility of profit. Harm is incurred by attempts to protect people from risk, which impose unnecessary and unacceptable restrictions on freedom of action. A danger, then, is anything that threatens to disrupt one's personal activities.

In contrast, the egalitarian/sect model understands the person as vulnerable and thus risk as unacceptable (Douglas, 1996, 2004). It is the duty of those in positions of authority to foresee potential harm and to protect the vulnerable from it. This goes hand in hand with a commitment to help all in need and to set wide the scope of those for whom one is responsible. This is reflected in the environmental movement's mission to 'save the planet' or 'rescue the world'. The dangers

that beset the sectarian universe are often nebulous and low in probability but a harm foreseen is a harm that must be guarded against in this world-view.

The consequences for education's sect-like view of the person and the harms that threaten him or her are profound and the cause of much about contemporary educational beliefs, if not practices, that drive individualist commentators into a rage. I have already mentioned the contrasting approaches to competition and its desirability or otherwise. Individualists believe that people rise or fall on the own merits: just level the playing field by removing unnatural impediments and let them get on with it. For egalitarians, equity and justice demand that the finishing line be not so much reached by everyone as abolished altogether. Practices, for instance, standardised testing, that inevitably discriminate between children are anathema.

The teacherly belief that education is not merely concerned with the academic development of the child but the care and nurture of the 'whole child' is another example. The desire to foresee every need and head off every possible, if not probable, harm is a direct cause of the overcrowding of the curriculum, a consequence of the compulsion to include an ever-proliferating set of cultural and other perspectives, special needs programs and risk-reduction efforts ('child protection').

Hargreaves (1994) and others have observed that this open-ended conception of teaching is a threat to practitioners' well-being. It is simply not possible to tend lovingly and equally to every aspect of the development of every child one encounters in one's professional life. The inevitable result for many is guilt, while others 'burn out' and become cynical and detached in their attitudes to their occupation.

That teachers attempt interventions in children's development for which their professional training does not prepare them can also have unintended and undesirable effects. This is particularly the case with interventions that stray towards the psychotherapeutic. Fortunately many such programs result in nothing more than mostly harmless time wasting: I put 'child protection' education of the 'if it feels wrong you can say no' variety in this category (Scott, 2006). Occasionally children do suffer from lay attempts to diagnose the source of their difficulties and 'remediate' their social or psychological development, however.[3]

### **Policy Implications**

Understanding teaching as a profession that 'thinks' like a sect is extremely useful for making sense of what otherwise might be seen as a set of isolated and disconnected phenomena, for instance, teachers' hostility to other closely related educational specialities, their dislike of competitiveness and their anxiety to nurture every developmental aspect of each and every child, even where this makes the job tend towards the impossible. It also explains the seething rage that much contemporary educational belief arouses in the individualist adversaries of the sect that is teaching.

Analysing how education and its practitioners think from a cultural theoretical perspective also helps to make clear the origins of these phenomena: these do not lie in the individual quirks of the teachers themselves or in the failings and deficiencies of teacher education. Instead teachers think like members of a group that has been pushed to the margins, removed from access to social power and influence and subjected to unrelenting and status-eroding criticism. Those aspects of education that others find defective will not then be fixed in isolation but would respond to re-admitting education to its rightful place as a key social institution, with the concomitant increase in the prestige of its practitioners. 'Naming and shaming', on the other hand, will merely entrench the sorts of activities and attitudes that reformers wish to change (Scott & Dinham, 2002).

The seeds of change, where it is warranted, exist in the profession already. What I have described here are modal tendencies. Douglas maintains that all institutions play host to all four cultural tendencies and the cultures of hierarchy, individualism and isolated fatalism can also be discerned in any one school or in education as a whole. The egalitarians have the upper hand, however, and it is their rhetoric that prevails in public debates and policy writing on education. That a punitive and intrusive American federal policy initiative was called 'No Child Left Behind' illustrates this nicely, while it also demonstrates the American Right's skilful co-opting of the language of their political and ideological adversaries.

Arguments about the purpose and content of education will never end, however; nor should they. Douglas maintains that robust debate among the various cultural tendencies is a sign of social

health. Despite the fond hopes of the members of each culture, total or near total victory of one tendency over the others does not lead to the dawning of the new age and the end of history. Instead, the banishment of the vanquished leads to the breakdown of society and a massive increase in the numbers of those who subscribe to the apathetic and fatalistic culture of the isolates. It is a plausible argument that a range of troubling contemporary social phenomena may have their origins in the too-thorough victory of the individualist (market) tendency over the others. This could include the making over of education into its current sect-like form.

If the latter is the case, then teachers are performing a valuable social service by turning education into an enclave of protest against the tyranny of the market. Many certainly see themselves in these terms. However, if Douglas is correct and an institution's health depends on a robust interaction among all the cultural tendencies, then the dominance of education by the egalitarian or sect tendency threatens its health and long-term prospects. Demands that it 'clean up its act' will not have the desired effect, but changing the status of the institution will. In other words, those who find some aspects of how education thinks as an institution to be undesirable should consider whether a punitive and controlling approach would achieve the changes they wish for. If this approach continues to push education and its practitioners away from the social centres of power and status it will instead guarantee that education as an institution continues to think like a cult and not a partner in the central social enterprise.

### Notes

- [1] I have had extensive discussions with members of various professions and with eminent academic members of these about this issue. The best informed and most reflective are those who happen to be married to be teachers.
- [2] This fact explains the tendency for marginalised people to strive to establish a common identity where one plausibly exists, for instance, ethnic origins, sexual preferences or other commonality; anything that rescues them from the fate of isolation and total disempowerment. Some commentators in turn deride this tendency as a descent into 'identity politics'. See Kauffman (1990).
- [3] The Australian satirical television series *Summer Heights High* featured a fine (although fictional) example of one such program, in this case designed to address the difficulties that were supposedly the consequence of the Tongan nationality of a group of the school's students. While the resulting 'Polynesian Pathways' program could be seen as harmless time wasting, it did one of the main characters real harm because it substituted for proper investigation and remediation of his academic difficulties (Dinham, 2007).

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