Book Review

A review of *Inventions of Teaching: A Genealogy*, by Brent Davis, 2002. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 250 pp. ISBN 0805850392. $24.50 USD.

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British Columbia, like other jurisdictions, has witnessed in recent times the arrival of "Standards for the education, professional responsibility and competence of its members" (BCCT, 2004). The standards are an attempt to delineate the knowledge, skills and attitudes required of "professional educators" (BCCT, 2004). There are few surprises: Professional educators must "value and care for all children," "have an in-depth understanding about the subject areas they teach," "implement effective teaching practices," and "apply principles of assessment, evaluation and reporting" (BCCT, 2004). At first glance, the words appear as common sense, a relatively benign and acceptable response to the implicit question: What is teaching? And yet, reading the standards document alongside *Inventions of Teaching*, one is invited to move beyond common sense or standard understanding to consider teaching as a hugely contested term.

Equipped with Foucault's genealogical method and strong hermeneutic tradition of attending to words—what they are up to and what they have made us historically—Brent Davis sets out to trace the terrain of contemporary conceptions of teaching. Two key questions frame his effort to make common word usage uncommon: What is it that we believe about teaching? How is it that we came to think this way? He identifies a host of traditions that continue to be evident in the language of Western educational policy and practice. Davis explores the "realities" we imply when we use various words such as 'instruction' or 'learner' and also how those 'realities' continue to shape our thinking and acting in educational settings.

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His descriptions invite us into a consciousness of how our educational language, previously assumed to be "ours," is always borrowed, not natural but constructed. And so we are left pondering how rationalism, mysticism, or structuralism has shaped our practice over and above our wanting or doing.

Davis writes, for example, "One of the legacies of the combined influences of ancient Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian belief is the use of light as a basis of various figurative devices within discussions of learning and thought. Within mystical and religious traditions … humans … had to strain in the relative darkness to make out what ever could be discerned…. However, Descartes introduced a new twist … and argued that humans, 'by the light of reason,' could … discern truths hidden in the shadows. We could shed light on things by ourselves" (p. 76).

Davis charts not only the grammar but also tries to examine the change in these discursive systems over time as well as the subsequent changes in our views of teaching and learning. The author goes on to argue that words such as "enlightening" and "illuminating," formerly rooted in mystical and religious traditions, were stripped of their spiritual connotations. A rationalistic view of knowledge as a source of enlightenment was born; the shift to rationalism signified a move from gnosis (knowledge and meaning) to episteme (everyday know how, literal chains of reasoning). Mentalism (inner representation of an outer reality) followed, resulting in two major movements in psychology: cognitivism and constructivism. The linear, logical organization of ideas, beginning with the end/outcome and working backwards in incremental steps to the basics where the learner must begin, is evident in outcomes-based curriculum of today. *Inventions of Teaching* has helped me understand that such thinking is also evident in the teaching standards movement mentioned earlier. While teachers are constantly comparing learners' subjective sense making with objective knowledge (hence, the use of examinations), principals and teacher educators are asked to compare teacher's subjective sense making in practice with objective standards that seek to rationalize it (teacher evaluation).

Something that intrigued me as I read this book was the way in which the author managed to hold his own intellectual commitments lightly as he reads a range of intellectual traditions generously. Davis openly admits his own attachment to complexity and ecological sciences and his position is evident in the way he structures the text. Drawing on the notion of fractal and the related metaphors of tree, roots, branches, and leaves, he mounts a series of bifurcations between the metaphysical v the physical; gnosis v episteme; intersubjectivity v interobjectivity; rationalism v empiricism and so on. While dichotomies suggest an objective observer, bifurcation is attentive to the prejudices of the distinction-maker. While dichotomies fix, bifurca-

tion invites "a broader web of interpretation" (p. 10). Davis's framing of his project is pedagogical; he invites reader into a conversation with Western intellectual traditions, to trace their commitments and deceptions. In doing so, *Inventions of Teaching* gestures toward the possibility of new fabrications and designs. This book is no small achievement.

A cautionary note to the reader is in order perhaps. First, how do we avoid reading this text as a chronological narrative of development and progress, with complexity and ecological science as the approved endpoint or final chapter? Second, how do we resist consuming Davis's text as a 'true' representation of intellectual history rather than a singular construction? Third, how will we notice the silences in the text—feminist thought for example? Finally, how do we forgive unwarranted classifications—critical and post-structuralist theories as empowering pedagogies? Perhaps the answer lies in following up a reading of *Inventions of Teaching* with other books whose project is less ambitious and whose authors delve into only one of the many traditions of thought on the educational landscape. That said, Davis's book is an excellent starting point to such an exploration.

Inventions of Teaching is a beautifully crafted book and it ushers in many questions worthy of study: Why have some traditions prevailed in education? What continues to be absent? Who gains? Who loses? It seems to me that prospective teachers, graduate students, teachers in practice, educational leaders, teacher educators, and policy-makers would benefit from a deeper understanding of how we have come to conceive of teaching and concomitantly teacher education, at all levels. The burden of history exercises its gravitational pull on us daily in our educational institutions: perhaps it is time that we acknowledged this and began to struggle, alongside Brent Davis, with the history of our collective educational present.

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