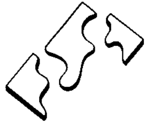

Researching the Meaning of Consulting in Continuing Teacher Education Through Phenomenological and Critical Inquiry Orientations*

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In this study, Favaro boldly undertakes a very difficult task. His intention is to recast the essential practices and institutional context of educational consulting while retaining it at the same time as a professional division of labour and source of income-generation for the grey cadres of faculties and colleges of education. In its skillful weave of lifeworld descriptions with the psycho-social theories underlying dominant consulting practices, and as a self-conscious research text, the study is admirable. Yet, in my view, it also displays a political and structural naivete in its prescriptions and approaches to pedagogical revolution and institutional reform.

Consulting is referred to as the clinical helping relationship that evolves between teacher and administrator in the context of supervision of classroom instruction. The study applies qualitative, interpretive methodologies to yield the complexity and richness of the intersubjective meanings that constitute consulting in institutional settings. A program of action is then developed to implement or practice the relational insights gained by prior phenomenological analysis. For this program, Favaro dwells on the principle of praxis as reflection-laden action. The lifeworld descriptions of participants are subjected to a critical conceptual analysis in order to disclose "the essence that grounds thought and action" in consulting. Formal plans for professional and institutional restructuring are offered, based on the preliminary inquiry that seeks fidelity between the normative-theoretic concerns of the investigator and their embodiment within concrete reform proposals. The study concludes with a personal and collegial commitment to sponsor the ongoing "mutual search . . . for ways to elevate consultative relationships with teachers" in the author's own work setting, which is a university college of higher education in Eastern Nova Scotia, Canada.

The call for a critical analysis of dominant consulting practices is long overdue. By uncovering the "coerced control" inherent in the relations of positivist social theory in consulting, Favaro shows how the prevention of authentic dialogue in social relationships is achieved. His personal project is to dissolve the widespread hold of structural-functional thinking in education, which, for many in this field, is the quintessence of scientific elegance in human research. The venue for such a project is cultural and political renewal through the alternative tradition of critical social theory, which we are encouraged to believe in as the self-sufficient carrier of new possibilities, genuine dialogue, and human transformation. What remains obscured for this reader, however, is not the global end-state of educational reformulation but the empirical political-cultural conditions that we must recognize and resist as new educators. Living acts of consulting that constitute a "leaping forth and seeking together" (p. 111), although intoxicating in their promises, do nothing, in my view, to quell the disquiet and uncertainty in confronting "alienation, repression, and

control" (p. 110). What Favaro does achieve admirably is the human grounding, as self-testimony for persons (the agentic state, if you will), for how and why persons can act self-interestedly and collectively in personal and collective change. The phenomenological analysis of consultant-teacher experiences yields essential descriptions that galvanize self-understanding, self-worth, and resistance.

The methodological element of the study, where lifeworld descriptions of consulting are convened, represents one of the most finely crafted, sensitive phenomenologies of educational settings that this reviewer has read. Through a series of staged interviews with five veteran teacher-educators and supervisors, and through culminating group reflection sessions, Favaro has creatively and interpretively distilled, from participants' accounts, a set of essential relations that ground consulting—at least, that is, within the horizons of six persons' experiences.

Drawing upon analogues of praxis in the tradition of critical social theory (Habermas, 1968, 1971; Marcuse, 1964), Favaro calls upon the normative and utopian beliefs of this tradition to undergrid his recipes for program and institutional change. Such beliefs include the affirmative power of the person as actor, the human interest in attaining social and personal freedom, and the trait of historical consciousness. Rooting these traits as a human ontology, as emergent but unredeemed needs that appear through, in this case, phenomenological descriptions, the author seeks to "understand and transform the human world" of consulting in continuing teacher education. Through this "praxiological orientation," eight to ten structural changes within the local college and departmental administration are sponsored as well as an equal number of prescriptions for deliberate change at the level of decision, design, and access to consulting.

I am in spiritual solidarity with the tone, intentions, and struggles that Favaro has invested in this study. It reminds me once again of the integral importance of subjective and intersubjective inquiry as a constitutive focus for any problem-posing inquiry in human science. As I celebrate the boldness of this study, however, I want to include a few disclaimers of my own that I feel are points neglected or underdeveloped in this "praxiological inquiry." Space permits me to mention four issues which I, in turn, will no doubt underdevelop.

1. Intuitively, I feel I understand the intellectual and moral crises that Favaro points to in educational leadership and research. I support his concern as well as most of the measures he takes to understand and combat these deformations of human practice. What I find essentially lacking in this research, though, is any developed position on the world; that is, there is no apparent *weltanschaung,* no real view of citizenship and civic or community competence, and no empowering view of our relationships with children.

On page 8, Favaro refers to an unspecified crisis (whether of persons or society is unclear) which is "an expression of a much broader institutional legitimation crisis rooted in the inadequacy of dominant theories of social action." The very argument that critical social theory (Habermas, 1975)

makes, however, is that we *must understand* the empirical crisis tendencies (political, economic, legitimation, and motivational) if we are to sort out our strategies of social renewal. I note that in Favaro's socio-cultural sketch of Cape Breton Island as a hinterland, the case is not made clearly enough as to how political, economic, and cultural dependence is still maintained with the mainland, with Canada, and North America. As a result, the praxical suggestions in this part of the inquiry are not structurally integrated with the historic relations of struggle and resistance in Cape Breton. This is important because it raises the question of what structural symptoms "alternative" consulting theorists actually see.

Similarly, conceptions and decisions concerning consultancy must be intoned by the question of pedagogy and our understanding of children. I, for one, cannot confidently deduce what understandings of children critical-interpretive orientations to consultancy would sustain. And yet, providing a position on children is a pre-condition for doing any so-called educational inquiry, even if it is available only as a footnoted source in the text. For pedagogy has to do with relationships of power between adults and children, and as Fred Newman (1977) suggests:

> those to whom power is delegated (e.g. educators with power to affect the lives of children) or those who propose that power be used in particular ways (e.g. advocates of curriculum for the schools) have an obligation to justify their use of power. (p. 31)

2. A more subtle point I wish to make has to do with the integration of the study's theorizing with its empirical descriptions and its practical outcomes. The extracted fragments I assemble here from the text will focus my later point of argument:

> [Man] must turn to history in order to understand the traditions that have shaped his own biographies and his intersubjective relations with other human beings.
>
> In recognition of the need to tie a projection of interest in emancipation closely to a re-interpretation of cultural traditions . . . (in Cape Breton Island) . . . the praxiological value of a critical analysis of consulting rests on the possibility of restoring to the consultative process a sense of community of persons engaged mutually in authentic dialogue. (p. 279)

These are admirable theoretic and normative assertions that few committed to radical change in education would wish to dispute. But, put very simply, that is their weakness. Their very nature suggests they must remain unexplicated as icons of right and wrong—fundamentally unable to inform concrete practice in mundane affairs. Nor do they contain the equally important analytic power of charting relation and mechanism between economy, culture, and self-consciousness. The problem with this sort of quasi-theorizing is that it blocks "praxis." One might describe it as a type of theological assertiveness masquerading as theory and, as such, it presents the same difficulties as does the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. That is, it is not easy to unpack its normative-practical content so that criteria, decisions, and organization for pedagogy, curriculum, and leadership can be guided by its principles.

If we examine closely the structure and findings of Favaro's study, it is not possible to see the deductive or dialectical argument that connects the necessity of the "recommendations for praxis" (departmental and personnel) with the foregoing phenomenological analysis, nor with the assertions concerning critical reflection in consulting. Those decisive practical and theoretical links between a normative vision, hard-nosed analysis, and radical human praxis have yet to be made. It is not sufficient to point out that traditions of science have always borne three cognitive interests, or that instrumental thinking represses human relationships in order to "bring about change."

Paul Feyerabend (1975) effectively distills the implications of this all too common practice of quasi-theorizing in educational research:

> This appearance of [theory's] success cannot in the least be regarded as a sign of truth and correspondence with nature. Quite the contrary. Indeed the suspicion arises that the alleged success of such theorizing is due to the fact that the theory, when extended beyond its starting point, has been turned into rigid ideology . . . it is "successful" not because it agrees so well with the facts; it is successful because no facts have been specified that could constitute a test, and because some facts have even been removed. (pp. 43-44)

3. Another area of methodology on which I wish to comment has to do with the notion of "praxis" that Favaro employs, and I mention this in the context of its overlap with the problem of quasi-theorizing. I suggest that we see the word "praxis" employed here as a theoretical category devoid of practical relations of resistance and struggle. It is, in my view, a use of language that is idealist in form and is non-promotive in its encouragement or sponsoring of critical practical action. As Feyerabend (1975) and Vazquez (1966) suggest, the failure to specify the practical, political resources and alliances available to participants in a problem is ideological and non-critical. The mere annunciation of "praxical" inquiry does not ipso facto bring its members any closer to personal and collective resolution. The facts, resources, forms, and strategies of necessary resistance in an advanced society, where we as persons combat the vertiginous relations of everyday life, have to be available to us in a discourse of research. Otherwise, liberal systems theory or any other schema that one can imagine could become a platform of justification. Persons within the educational consulting community of Cape Breton Island would be closer to a point of critical practice of "praxis" if the three classes or levels of critical theory's projects were self-consciously mediated together, in full awareness of all attendant risks involved for career and professional legitimacy.

4. There comes a point in the reading of this study where readers must commit themselves, where the author does not, to accepting the text as either one of phenomenological-interpretive inquiry or as a praxiological project. Clearly, strong practical implications follow from the adoption of either perspective. If, as reader, one accepts the study's phenomenological questions as primary ones, then the ensuing critical, practical, and historical analysis lies close to redundancy and is best placed in footnoted form. If, on the other hand, one accepts at face value the critical practical orientation of the study, one is obliged to see how all the methodological criteria for doing critical theory have been met.

In accepting the study as a critical statement on the world, one becomes concerned about the norms that specify the need for critical self-reflection. Self-criticism of one's conceptions, one's methods, and, above all, the idea of consulting as an occupational category would seem, *de rigueur,* a necessary feature of this study. In generalizing from the above statement, perhaps a few comments on consulting as an occupation are in order. The study is chock-full of references, allusions, and hopes for consulting. What I find difficult to rest with is the prima facie acceptance of "consulting," or "consultancy," or the "consultant" as categories and practices in their own right in the absence of any institutional or inter-occupational analysis of service or helping roles in education. Yet consulting itself is not a divinely-given category in the educational firmament that we all have come to know about. The absence here of any historical or structural analysis of consulting, save its origins, means for this study, at least, that consulting is a practice we must simply accept—albeit critical of its earlier and current objectivist errings. But surely we have to account explicitly for why the category of the consulting can sustain itself politically and technically in the occupational hierarchy of the helping professions. To say that consulting must include dialogic relations, participants' mutual re-searching, and a compassionate reciprocity says little more than what we would expect of a good progressivist discussing the authoritative bases of pedagogy.

In passing, I wonder too if some consideration might be given in such a study as to how consulting as an occupation has acquired a sort of professional status in the technical-rational culture of North American society. If we objectify perfectly innocuous communicative traits in a helping relationship, organize them as a system of knowledge, and then deny access to this corpus through technical language and apprenticeship, we risk what could be called the reification of technique into a technical-professional category. Should not a critical study, through its analysis, push back the institutional forms, the appearances, etc., that program, policy, and curricular innovations give off, and lay bare the vested interests in inequality and illusory reform cultivated by our state and educational bureaucracies? What needs to be shown is how the very cognitive states that work to occlude new ways of deliberation, and how new perspectives for educational projects are inscribed in the structure of occupational expectations and autonomy.

In conclusion, I would like to say positively that I have found this kind of study into the "researching" of consulting practice to signal the coming of age of educational research in certain quarters—most notably curriculum theory but also now in the area of consulting. It represents one moment in the move toward praxiological inquiry, and it stands on the shoulders of first generation re-conceptualist workers in alternative educational research. That is, Favaro's study recognizes, as a real alternative to objectivist teacher education in a society in crisis, the validity and urgency of redeeming an historicized theory and practice. The study transcends that plateau to research the stubbornly concrete relations of teacher consciousness-state-professional ideologies, the very mandate the grey instrumentalist cadres felt they had been granted. Favaro's work represents a real struggle and real success by demonstrating

the strength of conception and practical understanding he and his community of readers can convene, in solidarity, even though we stumble with smarting eyes to our cultural and political renewal. This study is testimony to the tenacity, sensitivity, and compassion that just one researcher can muster for all of us in pedagogy and curriculum. These qualities far outweigh any methodological deficits that the review of this work may have noted. It sets a landmark precedent in breadth and depth of commitment for future phenomenological studies in educational consulting and leadership to match. More than a few of us will be transformed through it.

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