EDITORIAL

Schooling and Technical Knowledge: Toward a Retrieval of Practical Understanding

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The papers in this collection draw on an interrelated set of research traditions and interests, rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnomethodology and recent Marxist studies. They are directed toward a central theme — practical knowledge, and the ways in which technical formulations of knowledge have come to replace such practical knowledge in the field of education. Overall, one could say that the understanding of practical knowledge that informs these papers is not one of unreflective "know-how" as opposed to the explicitness of theory, but is that knowledge which informs our everyday interests and concerns and orients how we live and make sense of our lives, both collectively and individually. Each of the research traditions mentioned above centers on the retrieval of such knowledge as the centerpiece of educational research and theorizing. But each engage this retrieval in slightly different ways, forming what Wittgenstein (1968) would call an "interweaving and criss-crossing" set of "family resemblances." In order to introduce this collection, we will be laying out the broad outlines of some of these traditions. Even though none of the papers is a pure example of any one of these traditions, each paper resonates in different ways with the whole network that these traditions involve. We will then provide a brief abstract of each paper, indicating how each text resonates with the texture of the whole.

Phenomenology as a method of research is rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl and his uncovering, in his *Crisis of European Science* (1970), of the *Lebenswelt* or "life-world" as the foundation of inquiry. Prior to the peculiar

constructions of scientific, objectivistic discourse is the world of "everyday life," the world of "lived-experience." Prior to any appeal to specialized techniques or methods, we already find ourselves in the midst of everyday life, with the understandings, experiences and concerns peculiar to that life. It is this sphere of "lived-experience" that phenomenology understands as the milieu "practical knowledge." In the field of educational research, phenomenology begins with the assumption that the focus of research must be the pedagogical experience itself and *not* theoretical/technical reconstructions of that experience. To oversimplify, the focus is not, for example, the nature of reading understood as some abstract listing of its characteristics, or some analytic dismemberment of its phonemic or graphic components, but the experience of reading for the reader. "How is reading experienced?" and "What is reading?" ask the same question. Phenomenology thus operates in the opposite direction of technical understanding: Rather than maintaining that technical understanding reveals the structures that underlie everyday life, phenomenology maintains that everyday life is the context in which technical knowledge and the structures and methods peculiar to it, appear. "The practical," phenomenologically speaking, is thus a context of meaning, action and experience which is excluded in some forms of research by pre-emptive notions of truth and objectivity which come from modern science.

Contemporary hermeneutics emerges out of the research traditions of phenomenology. One way of formulating the difference between phenomenology and hermeneutics is that hermeneutics makes problematic the relation between the inquirer and everyday experience. In "pure" phenomenology, this relation is *descriptive*. The phenomenological task is to describe, as "purely" as possible, the articulations of lived experience and therefore to hold at bay our tendency to go beyond such experience in our attempts to understand it. In hermeneutics, this relation is *interpretive*, embedded in the presuppositions of language, history and culture. Such embeddedness entails that hermeneutics has a concern for interpreting the "texts" in which the texture of lived-experience is interwoven (cf. Gadamer, 1975). Therefore, one cannot unequivocally separate the "lived-experience" of pedagogical phenomena from the ways in which lived-experience is already interwoven into the texture of language, history and culture, features of which are *already* technical in nature. For example, insofar as the discourse of child development now pervades North American culture, one cannot speak about children's active engagement with the world without already having one's speech resonate with the work of Jean Piaget *even though* such resonance may be beyond the explicit intent or explicit lived-experience of the speaker (Jardine, in press). The retrieval of practical understanding, in hermeneutics, is not the retrieval of a sphere of experience untouched by technical knowledge (which could characterize phenomenology in its purest form), but the retrieval of the interpretive interplay between the texture of individual human experience and the texts of human life as a whole.

Recent studies in what has been broadly termed "the sociology of everyday life" bear a family resemblance to the concerns of both phenomenology and

hermeneutics. Perhaps the most productive and rigorous work in this sphere has been the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel (1967). His groundbreaking studies involved detailed attention to the reasoning practices or methods which people use to organize their activities. Research in this vein emphasizes practical reasoning, knowledge, and understanding to recover the competent and sensible character of everyday forms of conduct which conventional social science has *usually* ignored or treated as irrational. The reasoning of social actors is "practical" inasmuch as it involves the use of common sense knowledge as a basis for the conduct of everyday activities. In educational studies which draw on this tradition, the practical character of schooling is seen in terms of how phenomena such as vocational selection or curriculum design are realized through courses of action carried out in concrete social settings. For example, notions of skill and technique can be understood as: (1) part of an administrative process alien to the reasoning practices that actors (e.g., teachers or students) use to define their activities within their local context, but they are also (2) socially constructed categories which themselves are the product of practical reasoning, albeit a reasoning which is more aligned with the imperatives of institutional organization. Compared with hermeneutics, ethnomethodology gives primacy not to the *experience* of interpretation, but rather to interpretive *practices* viewed as constituents of situated courses of action. The emphasis shifts from experience and meaning to utterance and the joint construction of organized activities. This opens up the possibility of treating "skill" and "technique" as features of the social organization of knowledge which enters into educational practice.

Aspects of technical knowledge have also been addressed in recent Marxist studies of schooling. And here again, there has been a concern with recovering the understandings of those who are typically the objects of research and administration. For example, a number of recent studies of working-class culture have focussed on "useful knowledge," a notion which, at face value, appears to occupy an indeterminate place in relation to the practical and the technical. However, in the seminal writings of Richard Johnson (1979), the term "useful knowledge" designates attempts to impose a narrowly technical focus on the schooling of the working class, and the term "really useful knowledge" designates efforts of working-class radicals to instill in workers a broadly practical-political understanding of their place in the world. A number of studies inspired by Johnson have explored the fruitfulness of this distinction as it relates to contemporary tendencies in the process of schooling.

Other Marxist studies have addressed "the technical" more directly, often using a general critique of technological rationality as their point of departure. This approach is exemplified in the work of Michael Apple (1985), who addresses the emphasis on skill in curriculum design as an element of a logic of technical control. The emphasis on skill is seen as a strategy for reorganizing instruction which "deskills" teachers' work and controls the learning process from a position outside the educational setting as such. Technical control is thus seen as part of the managerial and administrative apparatus associated with advanced capitalism.

Studies which take technological rationality as their point of departure thus address the technical as a key constituent of processes of domination which exclude the possibility of raising practical questions about what to do and how to live (Habermas, 1970). One result has been a tendency to treat the practical somewhat abstractly as a set of considerations or experiences excluded by the overarching operation of technological forms of organization. Recent historical and ethnographic studies, such as those of Johnson (1979) and Willis (1977) have contributed to a more concrete sense of the practical within Marxist scholarship. Dorothy Smith, whose work incorporates aspects of phenomenological and ethnomethodological traditions of research, has also been influential in redirecting Marxist studies in education towards a fuller engagement with lived realities (Smith, 1987; Griffith and Smith, 1987).

We would now like to provide brief overviews of the papers in this collection. The first five papers are essentially conceptual in nature, involving the interpretation of texts which have a direct or indirect impact on education.

David Smith's paper*, "Children and the Gods of War," is a reflection on the ways in which the image of children which informs contemporary pedagogy operates under a paradigm of understanding as mastery and control. It attempts to recover the practical question of how we might live our lives with children while resisting those forms of technical understanding which begin with a hatred of difference and a desire to dispell it.

David Jardine's paper, "There are Children all Around Us" takes its title from Piaget. It examines how, in Piaget's work, children are "there" all around us, and contrasts this technical image of children, produced by certain fundamental ontological assumptions in Piaget's work, to the rich analogical network of images of children in which we live our lives.

Don Dippo's paper is an analysis of the ways in which the "social efficiency" view of vocational education has prevailed over the "social growth" view, and he analyses how the current shift from specific job training to concepts of "basic skills," "life skills," and "employability skills" amounts to a continuation of the instrumental attitude criticized by John Dewey. He argues for an approach which takes into account interrelations between technological, organizational, and political factors, and which would enable students to develop knowledge and understanding leading to some measure of control over their lives.

Alison Griffith's paper is an examination of the ideological dimensions of life skills curricula. While the notion of life skills derives appeal from its apparent resonance with student's lived interests, Griffith suggests that recent curriculum initiatives in this area are linked to wider administrative processes in which the broad concept of skill is used to organize relations between the educational system and the labor market, thus reorganizing students' practical knowledge into a technical form.

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Focussing on the curricular area of reading, Margaret Hunsberger provides sketches of both the traditional and "phenomenological" approaches to reading. The latter is formulated as an approach which retrieves the student's *experience* of reading as the fundamental pedagogical focus, a focus which is bypassed by more technically based approaches. Consideration is then given to possible effects of such a focus on "methods" courses in teacher education.

The second group of papers in this collection considers aspects of the construction of classroom knowledge, teachers' knowledge and student experience. These papers rely on interview data and data collected from classroom observation.

Garth Benson's paper is an examination of the place of technical knowledge in science teaching, and how the teacher provides an authorized view of the world to science students. Benson shows how this authorized view has its roots, not only in a particular empirical-analytic view of science, but in certain institutional constraints which determine the presentation of science.

In their study of the social construction of "skill," Jane Gaskell and Ted Riecken question the assumption that skills are objective, easily identifiable features of a job. Drawing on case studies of two clerical training programs, they examine practical exigencies bearing on how female students understood the nature of the work they planned to enter. They found that while many of these women accepted the stress on professionalism (implying respected and valued skills) in program curricula, others resisted this inflated notion of clerical work and they conclude that in either case, graduates face powerful barriers to getting their skills recognized, barriers rooted in the structural inequalities of the workplace.

Peter Grahame's paper takes up the theme of "really useful knowledge" by examining the social organization of knowledge in the teaching of skills for everyday living. In his examination of communication strategies in a lesson on nutrition, he finds a disjuncture between the skill-oriented curriculum frame promoted by the teacher and the impulses toward practical reasoning in student responses. The emphasis in such instruction on individual, skill-based responses is seen as continuous with the failure of schooling to address the social basis of those problems which inspire coping-oriented curricula.

Drawing on her case study of a program review within a community college, Nancy Jackson examines the application of the competency-based approach to the process of curriculum design. Her interviews with faculty and administrators reveal that when such measures are applied, curriculum decision-making loses its basis in the practical knowledge of teachers and is recast into an organizational form which emphasizes the expertise of employers and curriculum technicians. The organizational significance of "competence" is thus not as a measure of individual student performance, but rather as a form of technical control which marginalizes teachers' understandings.

Magda Lewis' case study of one student's participation in a high school cooperative education program focuses on contradictions associated with the gender basis of skill and their implications for women's work experiences. Through her placement as a day-care worker, the student Megan experienced a

troublesome tension between her own sense of competence and the realities of daycare as an organized work setting. Lewis shows that while Megan's practical understandings of "looking after children" directed her into an occupational choice associated with women's traditional role, her insistence on the validity of those understandings blocked her pursuit of the formal qualifications in early childhood education that she needed to win recognition for her competence in the labor market.

The final paper in this collection by Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly demonstrates the deeply ethical character of practical knowledge, informing, as it does , how we live our lives and manifesting fundamental beliefs about and orientations to the world. Access to such knowledge — in this case, the personal practical knowledge of a particular teacher — is not a technical matter, but an ethical matter involving appropriate action on the part of the researcher. In the retrieval of practical understanding, inquiry must be a "negotiation of narrative," not simply the application of a technical method.

This last paper provides an important way to reflect on this collection as a whole. The research methods mentioned above have a unique relation to the topic of practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is not simply the peculiar *object* of these methods, but informs, in a deep way, those methods themselves. Fundamentally, these papers begin with an assumption uncommon in conventional research: Inquiry is, to some extent, the recovery of the bonds that link the researcher to the subject of research. To the extent that the topic of these papers is those practical understandings in which we live our lives, we, as researchers, find ourselves already embedded in these understandings just as the subjects of our research. These papers thus do not simply speak on behalf of a retrieval of practical understanding from technical estrangement *as their topic.* They also reflect a similar concern on behalf of the nature of educational research itself. In its more conventional modes, research has become estranged from the context in which the subjects of that research live their lives. The "retrieval of practical understanding" in the field of education, therefore, is not the retrieval of a special object domain, but the retrieval of the common context in which both researcher and researched find themselves, namely, the world of everyday life. From a standpoint concerned above all with the application of technical knowledge to instructional and curricular processes, this may seem like nothing more than a muddying of the waters. From our point of view, there can be no future in innovations or remedies in education which do not respect the practical understandings of those involved in the everyday accomplishment of educational activities.

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