

Education Studies and the uses of Literary Form: towards student engagement with educational theory

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Abstract

This article, by the employment of a novel theoretical framework, examines the value of introducing short stories to students of education and champions the literary genre of the short story. These stories provide convenient material to engage and enthuse Education Studies students and to position undergraduates at the nucleus of an Education Studies programme. Initially, an examination explores and clarifies the emergence of this novel framework, entitled The Four Pillars for Education Theory, before moving on to critically examine an extensive overview of Education Studies and the inherent themes and arguments suggested by writers within the field. In addition, this piece will discuss the motivations, that is, the inspirational influences that set out the reasoning to underpin the value of introducing worthwhile literature to students of Education. Furthermore, it provides a working example of how this material can be implemented as convenient seminar discussion material.

Keywords

Four Pillars, short stories, Critical Theory, student engagement

Introduction

From the outset it is important to note that the intention throughout this article is to cultivate and qualify how the genre of the short story, in combination with a theoretical framework entitled the Four Pillars for Educational Theory, will illuminate all aspects of Education Studies. Furthermore, introducing an arts based approach to Education Studies could possibly encapsulate the genres of film, documentary and poetry to enliven seminar interactions in combination with the Educational Theory proposed in this article.

It is possible to introduce short studies to Education Studies curricula as established writers such as John McGahern, Frank O'Connor and Liam O'Flaherty have produced extensive and highly engaging short fictive texts. Each writer has endeavoured to captivate the Irish 'fireside' story telling tradition embracing all aspects of the social

world and facets of the human condition. As this article will demonstrate, prominent educational commentators have advocated the need to introduce worthwhile literature in novel form to students of Education. However, this paper will suggest the use of short stories, as the format will appeal to students providing a snapshot of characters, themes and incidents at great pace. Indeed, as Amy A. Metnick (1999) points out “the genre satisfies the short attention span of many readers whose tastes and habits are dominated by a television dominated culture” (Metnick et al.,1999: 24). In addition, this article will endeavour to highlight that a deconstruction of short stories will reveal a deep resource and positive contribution towards teaching and learning.

A theoretical construct

Nigel Blake and Jan Masschelein (2003) have filtered the raw materials emanating from the ‘thinkers’ that made up the Frankfurt School of Philosophy and Social Theory, proving that it is difficult to identify authoritatively the core principles and ideas of Critical Theory. Ward (2007), within his extensive study entitled ‘Undergraduate Education Studies as an emerging subject in higher education’, has utilised the key features of Critical Theory to act as convenient and accessible signposts to understand the nature of education policies and practice. In addition, Ward suggests that the importance of education is to empower the individual, in what Barnett (2009) articulates as an ‘*emancipatory*’ lift from their immediate orbits in order to question the established hegemonic social/political doctrines presently influencing the social world.

This paper has adapted and streamlined these key concepts but will continue to highlight their roles as one of emancipation and to enhance free-thinking. Indeed, Blake and Masschelein (2003) have suggested the underlying motive of Critical Theory is to create a more humane world through the elevation of the individual, that is, an unshackling of the mind. Blake and Masschelein articulate this point:

“Critical theory may be thought as, in the first instance, a critical reappropriation and revision of Marxism, albeit one which has travelled a long way from these roots. And as such, its relevance to education might seem dubious. However, one of the commitments from Marxism that remains most potent in Critical Theory is, loosely speaking, that of liberation from ‘false consciousness’.” (Blake and Masschelein, 2008:38)

For Blake and Masschelein, critical theorists have taken little interest in Education curricula, and in parallel, educationalists have ignored the potential of Critical Theory

as an '*emancipatory*' vehicle for student engagement. Blake and Masschelein (2003) have argued that the core elements underpinning Critical Theory are:

“..a critical stance to society in its actual and developing forms, informed by a strong ethical concern for the individual and a rejection of all possible excuses for hunger, domination, humiliation and injustice.” (38-39)

Ward (2008) champions this theoretical approach for educational issues. This construct could help to motivate students as their lived experiences within education and their immediate social worlds would be harnessed by the elements of Critical Theory. In what I have entitled as 'The Four Pillars for Educational Theory' (see Grant, 2012), and how they will be adapted as deconstructive devices for the short stories, is now explained.

Four Pillars for Education Theory

Four Pillars for Education Theory will provide the signposts for students to enable critical thinking, and are followed where applicable, when deconstructing the short stories. They include:

- Critical stance towards society.
- Ethical concern for the individual.
- Rejection of hunger, humiliation, domination and injustice.
- Longing for a better world.

For Blake and Masschelein, the four elements give credence for educationists to consider Critical Theory as a means to achieve objectivity. The writers expand on this point:

“Objectivity is not achieved by theoretical distance from phenomena, but by personal closeness to them. Critical Theory views society from the position of the injured and the vulnerable.” (Blake and Masschelein, 2008: 39)

This paper will endeavour to discuss the means to achieve this closeness through a combination of short stories and the Four Pillars; positive student engagement will be the desired outcome.

Futures: the “heartbeat of Education Studies”

At this juncture, the very nature of Education studies will be discussed to highlight that this course of study has the capacity to embrace the humanities, and in particular the

genre of the short story, in a positive way. The primary focus will be to convey the need to place students at the nucleus of the programme, and how the short story will provide valuable pedagogic moments within Education Studies to facilitate this positive move.

David Matheson (2004) argues that the influences determining the direction of Education Studies is in the hands of “those directing the study” (:12). Indeed, the writer continues to suggest that: “Education is unlike most other academic disciplines in that there is no agreement as to what it actually is” (Matheson, 2004:12). This, then, forms the basis of Ioanna Palaiologou’s study on whether Education Studies is ‘inter’, ‘multi’ or transdisciplinarity in nature. For Palaiologou, these are the “three common levels of integration of knowledge between disciplines” (Palaiologou, 2010:270). The writer suggests that this course of study has been totally dependent on the established disciplines from psychology, sociology, history and philosophy and, consequently, Education Studies cannot claim to be a stand-alone discipline. Palaiologou continues:

“Firstly, education needs the body of knowledge from other teams/subjects/disciplines to give it efficacy and secondly, the nature of education deals with real world problems.” (:274)

Let us deconstruct this appraisal. Palaiologou argues that Education Studies is dependent on a plethora of subjects/disciplines in order to provide a worthwhile and intellectually stimulating course of study. However, the notion that education deals with real world problems allies itself to a proposal of making students central to Education Studies - students are actors within the social world and they are acutely aware of real world problems. In addition, Palaiologou suggests that teaching and learning is not set in isolation: “they are influenced by social, cultural, political and economic elements” (:274). This is an interesting response and clarification in relation to this paper is necessary.

Palaiologou has highlighted that teaching and learning is not devoid of outside influences within the social world, and within this world, education students absorb societal influences and established norms. It is argued within this paper that short stories are social commentaries – they mirror certain instances and scenes that reflect to the reader the moral, political and economic forces that shape our lives. Palaiologou highlights the QAA (2000, 2007) Benchmark Statements for Education Studies:

“Education Studies is concerned with understanding how people develop and learn throughout their lives. It facilitates a study of the nature of knowledge and a critical engagement with a variety of perspectives in ways

of knowing and understanding drawn from a range of appropriate disciplines.”(2000:14)

Palaiologou conveys that Education Studies cannot claim itself to be a standalone discipline; nevertheless, the writer does suggest that Education Studies, viewed through a transdisciplinary lens, makes this course of study unique as it influences “thinking and pedagogy” to be more creative. Again, this creativity can be cultivated by short stories as they offer valuable material to enhance and facilitate student engagement and seminar interactivity. For the writer, a transdisciplinary approach creates novel interactions with the established disciplines and produces “a new lens for cooperation and collaboration” (:278). Palaiologou continues:

“By unifying knowledge it goes beyond the compartmentalised understanding of the present world to create a picture that reflects a complex localised context.” (2000: 279)

Who best to comment on this present, localised world? Once more, an exploration concerning Education Studies sets students at its core. Students themselves have knowledge and experience of their immediate worlds and their response to it will adorn a blank canvass to reflect the complex localised context of their lived experiences. Indeed, short stories will provide the platform and scaffolding to enable students to articulate and grapple with contentious themes within education and civil society.

Andy Pickard (2006) offers an interesting appraisal in ‘What is worth knowing in Education Studies?’ The primary aim of Pickard’s proposal introduces the notion of a phenomenological epistemology for Education Studies and relies on what he perceives to be the important work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer’s contribution to action research concerns hermeneutics, that is, “the ways in which interpretation of experience generates knowledge” (Pickard, 2006:17). For Pickard, phenomenologists endeavour to explore aspects of the everyday and, how human beings respond to their social worlds in creative and pragmatic ways. Pickard argues that the “idealist tradition” has dominated western thinkers as the rational mind comes to informed “objective truths and applies these to practice” (:17). For Pickard, this has dominated current views and thoughts on Education Studies whereby students will be subjected to, and learn, the correct educational knowledge for their intended careers. Interestingly, his alternative epistemology lies at the heart of this paper as he concerns himself with nurturing the concept of ‘student voice.’ Let us quote Pickard in full at this juncture:

“Phenomenology means starting with the knower, rather than the assumptions about the known. In other words, it means paying serious attention to Education Studies students. Their sense of themselves in practical educational situations as learners, as potential educational workers in many ways...should be at the heartbeat of Education Studies as a subject”. (2006: 17)

The writer continues his appraisal of the need for education students to be the primary focus, being active and essential participants within an Education Studies programme. For Pickard, student understanding of their immediate worlds coupled with a genuine self-realisation, will lead to a comprehension of how students perceive the social and political forces that shape and control modes of thought that shackle the individual to the social norms of the day.

Inspirations

Rodney M. White (1993) has championed the genre of the short story for the teaching of History, as he believes that brief, rich and cultivated narratives will provide the platform for student understanding. He continues:

“As children we learn through nursery rhymes. As we grow older we acquire meaning and understanding about our world through myths legends, biographies, and works of fiction.” (White, 1993: 305)

The short story framework offers the opportunity for the reader to process the narrative in a clear way. White also asserts that as the short story mimics the novel format, students can embrace the drama of events and character intricacies more quickly, as opposed to the unfolding of situations, scenes and protagonists extensively treated within a novel. Diana Mitchell (1994) embraces the short story form as valuable teaching material suggesting that stories “can speak to issues in students’ own lives” (Mitchell, 1994: 87). In addition, the writer argues that this genre “keeps students involved” and, more importantly, “They can spark great discussions” (:87).

Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (2005) re-evaluate the impact on action research concerning educational theory and educational practice. What is of interest for this exploration is “that there is still sense in the notion of ‘emancipation,’ socially, politically, culturally” (Carr and Kemmis, 2005: 354). The writers argue that a critical rationality offers an individual the ability to unshackle themselves from preconceived thoughts, including “taken for granted assumptions, habits of mind and existing expectations about how the world should be ordered” (:354). One of the Four Pillars

is highlighted at this juncture but in a thought provoking manner, that is, the aspiration to eradicate the sense of 'injustice' within our established social orders that have willingly accepted, through the process of inculcation, to freely and unwittingly accept injustices. For the writers, "The struggle, not *for justice*, but *against injustice*, still impels action and thought, and practice and theorising" (:354). Carr and Kemmis enthusiastically embrace this concept, stating:

"However, for science, social science or education to give up on the struggle for injustice is not bearable. That struggle, we contend, is an indispensable part of the moral, social and cultural purpose of these fields."
(:354)

Carr and Kemmis acknowledge the "disquiet about what justice consists of" (:354). Nevertheless, the aspiration to root-out injustices, of whatever form and manner they are revealed, is of paramount importance. Certainly, the writers endorse the need to recognise and confront the arbitrary nature of suffering that is prevalent throughout the world. This, then, is the moment of engagement for Education Studies students as short stories can convey injustices within the world - individuals are then able to test their notions of what justice actually is. Indeed, the journey from the initial stages of recognition, to a construction that in their minds displays a sense of justice, certainly represents a seeking out of new forms of knowledge and understandings. More importantly, the writers embrace the significant and valuable role of narrative in relation to teaching and learning, stating:

"We welcome understanding of narratives, stories and life histories as ways of exploring how participants understand the social life of which they are part." (:355)

Once more, a common denominator exists, initially from the writers thoughts in relation to educational action research as this mode of engagement can highlight problems that have otherwise been infiltrated and accepted and frequently taken for granted. Introducing short stories, penned by established writers, offers a variant to the original Carr and Kemmis proposal. The life histories are certainly prevalent within short stories as all endeavour to portray the social world and the human interactions that are, at times, shaped by the taken for granted dominant norms.

Let us continue on the theme of literature as a means to engage, enthuse and encourage a positive student experience.

In ‘The Uses of Literacy in Teacher Education’, David Carr (1997) is not referring to Education Studies directly; rather, the writer is suggesting a re-think in relation to teacher education and training. Nonetheless, his suggestions could be attributed to Education Studies and the inherent claims of the value of literature are certainly plausible for this discussion. This fascinating paper provides a suitable platform for the introduction of short stories to an education programme. For Carr, implementing such a proposal would expose students to the aesthetic undercurrents within worthwhile literature and would enhance the professional development of intending teachers suggesting:

“...it is at least plausible that any such programme should include serious acquaintance with kinds of study and enquiry conducive to the development of a subtler and more nuanced grasp of the niceties of human association and a broader appreciation of human social and cultural values.” (Carr, 1997:62)

For Carr, a turn towards the arts and humanities, rather than the ‘social or other sciences,’ will act as a form of educational compass – guiding the student through the complex world of educational ideas and values. Carr continues to extol the virtues of such an approach and the “enormous significance and potential of myths, legends, epics, fables, stories and other forms of pre-theoretical poesy narrative, for an educated appreciation” (:63). Potentially, a range of fiction of whatever genre has the capacity to fit neatly within an education programme as these can be “potent sources for moral insight” (:63) as opposed to the reliance on History or Philosophy.

What Carr endeavours to suggest here is the genuine potential to emotionally engage students with exciting texts that convey to the reader all aspects of the human condition and the social world with all its moral/socio-political themes. The writer clarifies his point with examples; the hegemonic forces within Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) including a close reading of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) will highlight the “implications of mind control and indoctrination” (:64). In addition, Carr asserts that D. H. Lawrence’s impressive literary output conveys a ‘passionate social and cultural criticism’ resonating with educational questions and these, with other modern works of fiction, are “clearly ripe for imaginative development” (:64) in relation to course providers and their curriculum.

Carr is not suggesting a total disregard for the theoretical and practical elements essential for prospective teachers but a ‘pruning’ of teacher education, as he believes

“that students stand to gain far more insight into curriculum issues” (:65) when studying fiction. Carr continues:

“What I am envisaging here, then, is not the substitution of literary studies for existing professional studies, but the replacement of the all too familiar dreary pseudo-scientific ragbag of stale psychological theories, sociological statistics, policy information and tips for teachers.” (:65)

Carr reluctantly concludes that his views will be looked upon unfavourably and with self-resignation: “I am aware that I should not expect to see these proposals warmly welcomed” (Carr, 1997:64). On the contrary, this paper warmly welcomes this proposal and champions his efforts. In combination with *The Four Pillars*, the intention is to streamline his original suggestions and introduce a canon of imaginative and exciting short stories. The following section will examine the educational value of this pedagogic approach.

Intentions

The intention is to approach the deconstruction process through a series of historical, sociological and political viewpoints whilst retaining the fictive pieces in their entirety.

The Four Pillars are implemented as ‘critical tools’ to unlock the texts in conjunction with other research material. In addition, they encourage the notion that literary forms can speak to students. From this, discussing events within the narratives can be related to events within their own lives and communities. This approach provides students with the means to reflect upon and understand their lived experiences in relation to contemporary events in education and civil society. A primary aim is to introduce major social theoretical commentators and research material and to relate prominent signposts to incidents and themes within the stories. The seminar activity sheet (see Appendix One – Seminar Tutor Notes) offers several quotations by established theorists which highlight and clarify the social interactions inherent in the narrative. From this, the intention is to achieve deep learning outcomes and greater understanding of theoretical principles and systems.

Table One, Seminar Activity/Lesson Plan, conveys the elements within a seminar session including questions. However, this can be adapted to suit tutors’ requirements and interests. A more detailed seminar/lesson plan can be found within the appendix.

Table:1

Seminar Activity/Lesson Plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Following a close reading of John McGahern’s short story ‘Korea’, and implementing the Four Pillar lens, are there incidents that relate to their own lives and communities and the wider contemporary world?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In the first instance, discuss how social class has affected their lives to enhance the reflective process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Where possible arrange four groups to discuss a single theoretical Pillar and explore the texts for evidence and aspects of their given Pillar (Critical Stance towards society; ethical concern for the individual; humiliation and injustice; is there a longing for a better world?).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Proceed to discuss the themes inherent within the story; suggesting how events within the piece can be associated with current events; how it relates to their experiences and their communities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As the seminar unfolds, the introduction of several talking points would add to the general flow e.g. School selection processes, geographical determinants can have a major influence and shapes an individual’s educational experiences and opportunities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Invite each group to write down the influential determinates that dictate life chances and academic success. From this, introduce prominent theoretical principles and relate to instances within the story and students’ experiences and observations.

The Keynote for Education Studies

Writing in 1948, Sean O’Faolain offered a critical and pessimistic appraisal of the short story genre: “I suppose no university in Britain thinks the short story other than a modern toy” (O’Faolain, 1948:34). For O’Faolain, the short story form was comparable to the

high works of literature and, at the time of writing, he was certainly convinced as to the literary merit and educative value of the short fictive piece. This article has endeavoured to continue O'Faolain's assertion of the educational value derived from a combination of the Four Pillars with the short story form. It is with O'Faolain's own words that fittingly encapsulate the importance and relevance of this novel pedagogic approach as a means to captivate student interest:

“At the very opening a writer, at any rate a modern writer, must make an immediate and intimate contact with his story. For this reason, I confess, I tend to judge most of the stories I read by the opening sentences. When I say this, I am not thinking of the beauty of phrase or the rhythm of the sentences, or anything of that sort. I am thinking only of this one kind of effectiveness: do we strike the keynote at once?”
(:192)

The 'keynote' as referred to by O'Faolain here is the appropriate moment that will facilitate student engagement.

Conclusion: to withstand the glare

In his research, Ward (2007) revealed the “benign indifference” conveyed by more established subject leaders and departments towards Education Studies and these misconceptions are still apparent today. In order for Education Studies to withstand the glare from sceptical academic commentators and university departments, the introduction of worthwhile literature in combination with the Four Pillars will enhance the scholarly nature of the subject. This, then, will provide a genuine framework towards student engagement within an emerging and popular undergraduate programme.

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Appendix One - Seminar Tutor Notes

The following seminar guidance notes were given to all tutors leading seminars. The framework will convey the rich seminar discussion material that can be freely lifted from John McGahern's short story 'Korea' (2006). First year cohort Education Studies including BAQTS students attended the seminar in multiple groups. (Student responses and outcomes will be introduced within a forthcoming article).

'Korea' by John McGahern: Seminar activity sheet/Lesson plan

Aims:

Outline the value and importance of short story narratives to engage Education Studies Students. Introducing the Four Pillars to 'Korea' will highlight various discussion signposts and act as indicators to convey relevant theoretical concepts.

Background Information:

John McGahern (1934-2006) was born in Dublin. He trained as a primary school teacher but he was removed from his position on publication of his second novel, *The Dark*, (1965) which was banned by the Irish state censor. The undercurrent within 'Korea' is the father's disappointment with his life following revolution. The execution scene is situated during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). The title 'Korea'

refers to the Korean War (1950-1953) and acts as a backdrop to the narrative.

Theoretical elements introduced within the seminar:

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron (1977) have argued that cultural habits and dispositions inherent within the family will be the active determinants for educational success:

“The success of all school education, and more generally of all secondary PW [Pedagogic Work], depends fundamentally on the education previously accomplished in the earliest years of life” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977:43).

Crossley (2008) expands on this notion that students who are subjected to worthwhile cultural capital fare better and respond positively within educational arenas:

“These students appear brighter and more articulate to their teachers because they speak the same language and because the cultural knowledge and abilities valued and rewarded within the educational system are those which these children have experienced and acquired at home” (Crossley, 2008:95).

“the dominant class have only to *let the system they dominate take its own course* in order to exercise their domination” (Bourdieu, 1977:190).

Towards the Four Pillars. Examples inherent within the story:

The character interactions, situations and scenes can be used as convenient examples of some of the theoretical elements presented throughout the Education Studies programme. These elements are at times difficult to grasp but a deconstruction of the text can offer suitable examples for students to identify.

Critical stance towards society:

Ask each group to identify elements of social, cultural and economic capital. Social, cultural and economic capital is presented within the story and this can be explored to expand and highlight a number of Bourdieu's notions (including other theorists introduced at this level) with tutor discretion:

The father's sense of alienation, due to the retraction of his fishing licence, has led to a need for his son to emigrate to America. The father's lack of social capital and influence within his immediate world, that is, 'the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize' (Bourdieu, 1985) determines his class position. Indeed, the humiliation he has suffered is expressed in the narrative – **'I fought for this country.**

And now they want to take away even the licence to fish' (p. 48)

Phrases spoken by the father, such as **'comes from going to school too long'** (p.46) is an example of class position 'reproducing itself' which is an important Bourdieu notion. Cultural capital is expressed in the form of examinations, and the quest to gain qualifications as a bargaining tool to enter the world of work.

Ethical concern for the individual; a rejection of domination and injustice:

The father and son relationship offers potential to introduce and discuss a psychological element when examining the interchanges between the two: what are the motives of the characters in the story? The father is a dominant uncommunicative 'bully' who has raised a boy who lacks confidence – **'a splintering of a self-esteem'** (p.48) - which could be rich ore for general discussion and provides latitude for all tutors to steer questions to suit student interests and responses. 'Habitus' can be introduced at this juncture as our lived histories can be active determinants to the way we carry ourselves within the social world – "...our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being' (Maton, 2008: 523). The boy's obvious discomfort and 'the shock' he was to feel when making a 'social blunder' is an aspect of his 'habitus'.

One sentence offers the opportunity to debate the contested notion of the metamorphic transition from childhood to adulthood. There are ethical dilemmas within this theme that can be explored by students within the seminar. Here, we have a sensitive youth who is about to breach the gates towards a dangerous manhood.

'In the darkness of the lavatory between the boxes of crawling worms before we set the night line for eels I knew my youth had ended' (p.49).

Longing for a better world: Education – a force towards social cohesion?

Father and son exchange:

'How do you mean *what comes up*?

'Whatever result I get in the exam. If the result is good, I'll have choices. If it's not, there won't be choices. I'll have to see what I can get' (p.47).

Education enhances social improvement as the actor is proactive, and within the story, the boy is thus able to create his own life if the result is good. If the result is bad then the social world dictates his lifestyle and career trajectory – he his passive rather than active. Within the narrative, education is a powerful bargaining tool in order to take hold of your life.

Questions (sample)

1. Is education a positive, life changing force for good or a source of envy and division within society?
2. Reflect on your role as a teacher (prospective teacher) – can you repel the social forces of inequality that shackle educational achievement? How would you achieve this?
3. Teachers must ensure that children feel positive about themselves and encourage ambitions. Consider the father's actions within the narrative, that is, the 'bully' who shatters a young person's self-worth and confidence – can a teacher compensate for this?