
Reflection on Kenton 2007

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My first Kenton was in the late eighties when I was a B.Ed Honours student. It was a tumultuous emotional and intellectual experience. I felt socially and intellectually self-conscious, awkward, and out of my depth. I was too shy to talk to people and was not sure I really knew enough to say anything. I was also enthralled. I was amazed to see my lecturers and authors of prescribed papers in our courses having intensely passionate, frequently heated, arguments about theories, evidence, interpretation and policy. They argued as much about the concepts underpinning the research as they did about its implications. They weren't just sharing information, they were prising open and reflecting on the very grounds of knowledge production, and its implications for teaching, education research and societal transformation.

I was astonished to see people coming at issues and questions in such different ways depending on the disciplinary and theoretical frameworks being recruited and critiqued. There were moments when I was a bit shocked by the styles in which people asked questions – not always polite! But, even in its most 'aggro' form, somehow there was still serious acknowledgement of and engagement with the kernel issues in the position under discussion. It was my first experience of truly being *in* a thinking/knowledge community, rather than simply accessing it via texts produced within such communities, and it opened my intellectual and educational imagination. I went home with more questions than answers but with a new sense of what it means to think and teach. I had a clearer recognition of areas in need of research and sense of conceptual resources and methods to explore them. I was hooked!

Umpteen Kentons later, I'm still hooked. For me, the 2007 conference ranked as one of the best in contemporary times. In fact, those who know me would have seen that I was so excited I couldn't hold back my enthusiasm in sessions, nor stop talking in between them. Maybe I felt such intense excitement because I have now reached a point in my own intellectual, social and emotional development where I feel confident enough to sit down with people I don't know and start a conversation. Maybe it's because I'm more able to position myself without feeling self-conscious and apologetic. Perhaps it's because the more I spoke to people about their projects and life stories, the clearer it became that our research questions are never simply a response to

policy problems but are rooted in our own histories and life quests. Perhaps I was so excited because every session I went to and every conversation I got involved in, helped me to reflect more deeply on the inner logic of my teaching and on questions I'm wrestling with, and to see new ways forward.

Beyond this deeply personal set of reasons, I was also excited because there seemed to be a widespread 'buzz' of excellent and interesting research that should contribute significantly to local and global educational concerns. I was amazed at the number of papers presented and the diversity of the issues addressed. So much so, that for every session I attended there were at least two or three others I wanted to go to but had to miss. Very frustrating!

This is the first Kenton I have been to where every one of the sessions offered something interesting, and contributed to pressing applied and/or theoretical issues. Relative to the Kentons I have attended in recent years it seems like there is more widespread acknowledgement that conceptual work is key to how we cast problems, and to developing principled analyses and strong languages of description for our objects of analysis. There appears to be a growing realization that if we are to find solutions to the deep educational problems in this country, there are no quick fixes – we are going to have to travel a 'crooked path' between theory, empirical inquiry, analysis, reflection, evaluation and critique. I was also excited that there are emergent young researchers who appreciate and are walking this crooked path. They are bringing fresh voices to Kenton, and making fine contributions to teaching and research in this country.

It is somewhat unfair to single out papers at the conference because I can only refer to sessions I attended. Nevertheless, I want to point to a few which reflect the kind of qualities I am so excited about.

For me one of the highlights of the conference was a session I attended purely by chance, because I love jazz music. Papers by Nolwasi Ndamase, *Gender Issues in Jazz* and Zoliswa Twane, *Music Behind Bars* showed the power of deep theorising and fine empirical research. Ndamase's ethnography of Simpiwe Dana's life history and analysis of her music and lyrics, all contextualised in a history of South African jazz, powerfully illuminates the relation between social structures and relations, gendered experience, and creative agency. Twane's exceptionally powerful work investigated the phenomenal rise in the number of prisoners participating in the National Offenders Choir Competition through an exquisite combination of

ethnographic and action research. Significantly, though the project was an action research project, Twane framed the research within theoretical arguments – Foucault’s theory of the ‘panopticon’ on the one hand and Freire’s theory of conscientisation on the other. Her preliminary findings show in an exceptionally nuanced way how ostensibly constraining, regulative mechanisms are being appropriated and transformed by the prisoners with emancipatory consequences. I think it is fair to say that the power of Twane’s grounded, intensely scholarly work illuminated the room.

The paper by Dalvit, Mapi, Thinyane, Kaschula, and Terzoli, *Integrating ICT-based Indigenous Knowledge in the Teaching of isiXhosa to Rhodes University Pharmacy Students* offered an account of an imaginative research and teaching project which couples systematic research on traditional healing methods with cross cultural communication, teaching and ICT. The project is researching traditional healing practices, systematising the knowledge in these practices and working with this knowledge as the context for a course in isiXhosa for pharmacy students. This move is premised on the fact that locals who visit pharmacies are frequently also being treated by traditional healers, and that some traditional remedies and allopathic medicine could interact with life threatening consequences. Part of the project also involves connecting traditional healers in Dwesa to an ICT portal to which pharmacists are also connected. I think this project offers an extraordinary and exemplary model for those who argue for the inclusion and promotion of Indigenous Knowledge in university curricula. The project is also developing a team of fine ethnographers and rigorous academics.

To my mind, the paper by Shalem and Hoadley, *The Political Economy of Teachers’ (low) Morale*, is a ground breaking paper which does for our understanding of teachers’ work and accountability what the New Sociology did for our understanding of the ideology of meritocracy and the systematic disadvantaging of working class learners. The paper develops a sophisticated but accessible model, which shows that arguments about the low quality of teachers are extremely simplistic. More significantly, it argues that the very teachers most frequently accused of not knowing, doing or contributing enough have to invest far more labour, and in fact produce more value than those teachers who generally escape such critiques. I think many of the people who listened to this presentation would have experienced the kind of relief that comes from a sense that now one is getting closer to a more truthful, or deeper understanding of a persistent problem; perhaps teachers and teachers educators who were there felt relief that at last the real struggles of teaching in

this country were being described and explained in a manner that may enable policy makers reconsider subjecting teachers to even more accountability measures and to think about other ways of supporting them.

One of the most thought provoking, but also troubling, sessions I attended at Kenton was a symposium on a collection of essays by Wally Morrow, entitled *Learning to Teach in South Africa*. Morrow has been a leading presence at Kenton over the past two decades; customarily presenting papers on what it means to teach, the practice of teaching, and teaching for transformation in a society too often trapped in ‘doctrinaire thinking’ or ‘chains of thought on both sides – left and right. Over the years, he has developed strong critiques of the growing tendency towards relativism and a ‘politics of difference’ in arguments about, and justifications for, post-apartheid educational practices and discourses. It is precisely in response to these ‘chains of thought’ (through which we inadvertently perpetuate the legacy of our past) that the concepts of ‘frames of thought’ and the concept and practice of ‘critical thinking’ have been abiding concerns in his work. He has deeply impressed these two concerns into the Kenton ethos, in all of his Kenton papers and Kenton conversations.

Morrow is committed to the power of rational argument and a ‘politics of equal dignity’ and, more specifically, to the possibility of resolving disagreement through argument and evidence (without which there can be no claims to knowledge). He is clear that unless we learn to resolve disagreement through critical thinking, rational argument and a principle of ‘equal dignity’ we are unlikely to develop an enduring democracy in this country. Morrow of course recognises that these practices rest on epistemic access to education, arguing that this cannot occur without teachers who can organise systematic learning that can promote such access for all.

The papers in the symposium presented a range of responses to Morrow and focused predominantly on systematic learning, epistemic access and the practice of teaching. Lotz-Sisitka’s case study offered a powerful illustration and analysis of the deep problems of knowledge acquisition and development for learners in the Natural Sciences who, in line with widespread interpretations of the new curriculum, are expected to complete projects and independent investigations. However, without systematised instruction into the methods and conceptual resources of the discipline, these projects do not support epistemic access. Shalem’s paper prised open curricular conditions at the level of content, framing, and pedagogic mediation and judgments

necessary for promoting epistemic access to subject knowledge. Pendlebury excavated fine threads in a web of temporal relations and moments in the classroom, illuminating qualities of decisions about timing, sequencing and rhythms in pedagogic practices and the relations of trust necessarily entailed within systematised instruction and learning. Van Rensburg explored how students' competence and consciousness are radically transformed when they are taken through a systematic programme that takes them out of the classroom into the wider community. Finally, Allais explored some of the key underlying structures of the NQF, which have undermined the promotion and development of deep knowledge. Taken together these papers deepened understanding of the conditions necessary for systematic instruction that promotes deep knowledge and epistemic access. Several of the papers offered powerful critiques of our current curriculum policies and pointed to ways of addressing some of the most pressing problems of epistemic access inherent in the policies. The symposium vividly exemplified a key aspect of the Kenton ethos, namely that the ways in which one frames a problem, and the conceptual resources one brings to it, are central to research and the development of knowledge. Conceptual analysis matters, both in itself and as the basis of empirical work.

I want to briefly summarise Morrow's opening presentation in the symposium in order to contextualise some of the discussion in the sessions. His argument was situated in all of his concerns outlined above. He began with the claim that, if we are to transform this society then we have to transcend a 'politics of difference' and relativist arguments. We must share an intention to talk across disagreement and practice a 'politics of equal dignity' and respect. However, he went on to argue that if we are to do this, then we must proceed from a principle of 'charity'. As I heard him explain it, the principle of charity is that we cannot assume that people we disagree with are evil or stupid. We must start with the assumption that no matter how much we disagree with, or oppose people's actions there are reasons that underpin their actions, which make sense to them. In other words, we must try to understand their 'frames of thought' as a first step to addressing and engaging with differences. Importantly, this does not imply that we may not judge their reasons wrong or flawed – we must be able to do so. This is because critique of knowledge claims, premises, reasoning, evidence, and conclusions are the very grounds of critical thinking, rational argument and debate.

Rightly or wrongly, Morrow proceeded to illustrate his point about charity by suggesting that to dismiss the architects and upholders of apartheid as evil or

stupid would be to fail to develop and practice the very forms of thinking and discourse necessary for an enduring democracy. I shall say more on this below. He then proceeded to develop a deeper analysis of generative ‘frames of thought’, proposing that schooling and research should promote systematic inquiry and systematised knowledge. It is such knowledge that may enable us to transcend beliefs or doxa that lock us into perspectival views of phenomena or events and block transformation. He referred to Piaget’s work to explore some key aspects of critical thinking and inquiry. While Piaget was employed as a young man in Binet’s psychological laboratory – checking children’s IQ tests – Piaget came to the unorthodox view that the children doing the tests and getting ‘wrong’ answers were not ‘stupid’ (deficient adults) but were working in terms of different ‘frameworks of thinking’. Adopting this ‘charitable’ starting point he revolutionised conventional views about child development, problematising taken for granted assumptions and beliefs about knowledge and development. He noticed that there was a more general logic underpinning the contents of thought and how the structure of thinking frames how we experience the world. In other words Piaget questioned, explored and brought premises and evidence into a relation, to point to generative mechanisms of learning and development. Morrow proposed that in explaining the world and each other and attempting to transform our society into a more just society, we as educators and researchers need to develop and promote ‘frames of thought’ which promote deeper understanding and transformation and we cannot do it by talking past each other.

Ironically, the discussion that followed, exemplified some of the very problems that Morrow seeks to address. Based on the anger expressed by some Kentonites, and questions and comments which followed the session both publicly and in more intimate discussions, it seems that many people stopped hearing Morrow very early in the argument, i.e. at the point where he mentioned that we cannot assume that the architects and upholders of apartheid were ignorant and stupid. There is no doubt that if the point is taken out of the context of the broader argument in which it was made, it could be misinterpreted. For those who suffered so much under the apartheid regime it could be taken as a very insensitive and hurtful remark. Yet, the point was never to legitimate the doctrinaire thinking of those who promoted apartheid but to propose ways in which we can transcend their devastating epistemic legacy. The point is that we must transcend the kinds of frames that legitimated discrimination and violence based on a ‘politics of difference’ and a dualistic division of the world into ‘us – good’ and ‘them – bad’.

Perhaps, Morrow needs to develop his oeuvre further with a deeper exploration of the relation between argument, emotion, narrative and a politics of human dignity. Perhaps he also needs to do more work on the ‘pragmatics of communication’ and his style of presentation and inquiry. If we believe this, then we must engage with him in a manner which takes seriously what he is saying and how, and point to ways he could go beyond where he is now. At the same time, if we are committed to education for social justice we cannot afford to dismiss the point of his overall project or his argument in this symposium. As teacher educators, we must organise learning which promotes teachers who can promote frames of thought that will allow us, our students and their students to transcend the legacy of the past. As researchers, we must promote frames of thought which respect the integrity of our subjects, or objects of analysis, and that promote knowledge development and a ‘politics of dignity’.

I was deeply concerned that although we are academics and socialise others into academia, we don’t always seem to respect people enough to do internal readings of their work (i.e. looking at their quests and questions, and the inner logic of their work) before we start doing external readings (from our quests, projects and other research or evidence we have read, or from what we wanted to read). Perhaps, its not about respect, but another very uncomfortable social and intellectual legacy of our past. This Kenton I consciously sought out those I disagreed with and tried to explore their reasons, and their thoughts. We did not always resolve our disagreements, but I left our conversations understanding them and myself a bit more.

I am probably more of an educator than an academic. Usually, when I attend sessions I try to see what people are saying, to show them where there is something wonderful in their research that they are not yet seeing (a Zone of Proximal Development for their work), to show where the work could be strengthened, and to share what their work illuminates for me. Towards the end of this Kenton I had a kind of epiphany. It struck me that so many of the comments I made in sessions were comments I actually needed to make to myself, but could not see until I pointed them out in other people’s work (a kind of ZPD for my work). The example that I remember most clearly was something I said to Kiren Gokar after he presented his paper *Issues of Race and Language in Racially Diverse Schools*. I pointed out that in his analysis of the comments made by the teachers he interviewed, he seemed to be stuck in the concepts and categories he started with, and therefore was not seeing significant aspects of what the teachers were actually saying. I noted that

while the teachers blamed and even ‘otherised’ the students, their comments about students were usually situated in comments on how the presence of these students were affecting their pacing, sequencing, coverage etc. I proposed that this was highly significant – the teachers were actually pointing to the fact that all of their own habitual practices and taken for granted assumptions about the curriculum and teaching were being challenged at their very foundations. As I pointed this out to Kiren, I suddenly understood that, in all of my despair about working with students who did not seem to be ready for the level at which they were studying, I had failed to think about how the situation was challenging all of my taken-for-granted about teaching. I saw that instead of rethinking my baseline assumptions, I had been displacing the problem onto my students. This may seem obvious, but this is a key property of doxic knowledge – we do not always know why we do what we do or recognize the frames of thought that underlie our own positions and actions. In my case, it was my teaching, but I think others would have come up against their assumptions about intellectual work, research, policy, management and evaluation.

In the end, Kenton is more than is a forum for sharing research. It is about ‘troubling’ doxa, shaping research, promoting deep knowledge, developing an imagination for the possible, and forming new communities of inquiry and friendships. In doing this, it contributes to an understanding of, and potential solutions to, troubling problems and questions in a deep way and offers policy makers an imagination for possible solutions. Kenton is rooted in the knowledge that academic research is, and must be, governed by a different logic and different sets of imperatives to policy development. The excitement of Kenton is that it takes knowledge production and research about teaching seriously.

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