

Stagnant Schools and a Stagnant System

Much of what follows was written as a blog for the British Educational Research Association (BERA). It must be twenty-five years ago that I had the idea to write something with the title *Oxbow Schools*. Twenty-three years ago I met Stephen Kemmisⁱ and told him of my intention. He said that if I didn't use the title he would. If he ever did I must apologise for not having noticed; you can't catch everythingⁱⁱ.

This has been some gestation period. A couple of months ago (June 2015) I attended my last meeting of the CPD Committee of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET). People were talking about the unwillingness of schools to share ideas, knowledge, experience and expertise now that they are becoming less and less connected to representative local democratic institutions and, even when joined in chains (they often have posher names for chains), more and more inclined to plough their own furrows. As a headteacher of my acquaintance pointed out, it is only inspection that provides systemic cohesion these days.

At the meeting I mentioned my over long intention to write something with this title. The response was encouraging and when I was asked by Rachel Lofthouse to write a blog for BERA I decided to make use of it. I relied heavily on Rachel to learn how to do this.

There is, of course, a difference between the educational context of twenty-five years ago and now, 2015. In 1990 Kenneth Baker's National Curriculum and associated Assessment Orders were still new and, as an LEA advisor specialising in curriculum and assessment, I remember having to point out to a supremely self-confident primary headteacher who was used to exercising her professional autonomy that the word 'orders' was not idly chosen.

Nevertheless, the philosophy (perhaps, in some cases, the ghosts) represented by Stenhouse and Lawton, the Centre for the Study of the Comprehensive School, The Schools Council Humanities Project, Records of Achievement (also confusingly referred to as 'profiling'), Mode 3 CSE, GCSE, Integrated Humanities, Environmental Studies, The Childwall Project, DARTs and, of particular importance to me, the Politics Association: a series of inclusive professional attempts to take part in the construction of educational policy, all continued to occupy the part of the professional brain labelled 'values'ⁱⁱⁱ.

The worry is that there is less and less time to even think about values on a collegial basis and this is made worse by the democratic disconnect deliberately contrived by elected politicians. The professional response to policy is often first to moan and then to roll up the sleeves to try to make things work.

My professional motto of the time was to the effect:

‘do what you are forced to do while protecting and promoting what you believe you ought to do’.

After a while, however, I likened myself to a French police officer in 1940 that stayed in post thinking to mitigate the worst consequences of the invasion by the Nazis only to realise too late that children were shouting ‘collaborator’ at me when I patrolled the streets.

I believe that, especially in England, we are currently in the Fracking Stage of educational policy and that it is fast leading us to the Do It Yourself (DIY) stage. I say more (lots more) about this in the following link.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebFor%20DH%20Lawrence.pdf>

Here follows the, very slightly edited, blog.

OXBOW SCHOOLS

and worse

What name would you give to a school or group of schools that won’t share? ‘Oxbow’ sounds a good name to me, after those lakes that were once part of the mainstream but are now cut off to become stagnant. There have always been some headteachers, Chief Executives and owners of schools that preferred competition to co-operation: seeking to keep secret their perceived key to perceived success or to maintain their commercial brand identity. I wonder how the chance for teachers to engage in and with research might challenge these ‘oxbowian’ tendencies.

In 1975 Lawrence Stenhouse produced *An Introduction To Curriculum Research And Development*. It was an Open University set book. The Times Educational Supplement called it ‘a profoundly important book’ and predicted that it would be read widely. That was a time when thinking and experimenting about what and how to teach and what and how to assess were regarded as proper activities for professional educators and when universities appointed professors of curriculum development: a time when at least some educational policy was made on the ground.

<http://www.meshguides.org/action-research-stenhouses-concept/>

Stenhouse’s notion that Her Majesty’s Inspectors could support teachers as researchers did not seem impossibly outlandish then. It was his view that, because of the nature of their role, they encountered many schools and teachers on a national basis and were not only aware of so much that was happening but also in a position to spread the word. The word was, by the way, not necessarily about ‘best practice’, whatever that silly phrase means, but also about professional cock-ups. If only they were shared we could all benefit. Today, inspectors have become traffic wardens and the profession

dare not admit to any cock-ups. The accidental discovery of professional penicillin is less and less likely.

The response of schoolteachers to the 'R' word became stereotyped many years ago. It was said that if you walked into a school staff room and mentioned the word 'research' you would be told that there was

'a full moon, a high wind, heavy rain, we've had a wet break, the children are uncontrollable and I have just lost my last free period so don't come in here talking about research, thank you very much.'

Today there is a rhetoric of research-informed teaching and a growing grassroots movement of TeachMeets and Education Festivals. Sharing is promoted and the ideas and products consumed but some of the infrastructure available in the past has been fragmented, as has some of the original motivation and wriggle-room for teachers as researchers.

And yet, quite recently and for ten years or so, between twenty five and thirty five thousand schoolteachers in England registered each year for Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD). Even though there were dropouts and non-submissions, many millions of words were written by those schoolteachers making critical sense of their professional lives. The value of these is evidenced in the PPD evaluation reports

<http://ipda.org.uk/resources/ppd-reprts/>.

Whatever happened to those essays, masters dissertations and doctoral theses? Are they all in lofts around the country? Disappointingly (especially as PPD was government subsidised) it is certain that little of this 'sense-making professional research' has been read by an educational policy maker.

I have read lots of those teachers' words and I think Lawrence Stenhouse would have loved to see them. Some universities spent part of their PPD money on annual residential conferences for their students to share their learning; some organised low key but professionally useful publications; and some incorporated sharing into the learning. When, as an external examiner, you get the chance to meet a group of any kind of educators and you ask them if they also learned from each other they become very enthusiastic. As a former editor of CPD Update I always felt that the publication gained authority, purpose and momentum when it included a page or two from a teacher writing about (sharing) some professionally useful piece of research.

We have, however, lost some of the forces encouraging collaboration. Local Education Authorities have gone; fragmentation is now very obvious; coherence is difficult to discern or sustain; and we have governments engaged in what I have called 'social fracking'. As TeachMeets demonstrate the urge to share does continue to exist among teachers and Ken Jones in his BERA blog

(<https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/teachers-researchers-and-teacher-researchers>)

calls on the profession to take research engagement a step further as part of a sharing culture. Some senior leaders, managers and owners might not wish to share (perhaps preferring 'branding') but real professionals do.

I believe that universities too remain in a position to respond positively to the collective and inclusive values of teachers in schools and colleges. The recent BERA-RSA enquiry emphasised the relevance of research for the teaching profession, including for CPD

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/project/research-and-teacher-education>.

If there is no positive response we shall have not only oxbow schools but also oxbow universities. Eventually, England especially shall become an educational oxbow country.

Cliff Jones, June 17th 2015

ⁱ In 1983, with a lot of other people in Australia, Stephen Kemmis produced a slim book generally referred to as *Towards the Socially Critical School* (not its full title). I have used that book a lot and recommended it to many colleagues in universities who continue to find it useful.

In the mid 1980s there was only one copy of the book in the UK. It was owned by my boss and, wanting my own copy, I asked a friend who knew Stephen Kemmis and was about to visit Australia if she could get me a copy. She came back with six.

In 1992 I was 50. A friend said she was coming round with champagne. I told her I was far too busy for any of that stuff because I was behind with my GCSE marking. She turned up anyway, saying, 'I've brought you a present' and out of her car stepped Stephen Kemmis. I went to the chippy. We had chips and champagne.

These days the best way to get a copy of the book is via the following link.

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED295339.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Oxbow is not a name I would choose for a school should I be founding one. In the mid 1990s, however, the founders of a school in California boldly chose that very name. I hope they had not heard my mutterings.

ⁱⁱⁱ Now to try to work my way through some of the items mentioned in my rather crowded paragraph, fifth from the top.

There is already a link to information about **Lawrence Stenhouse** so I shall just add that he was the external examiner when I did my masters degree. Meeting us students he wanted to know why we were not doing more empirical research. I thought I was but when academics used 'big words' like that I tended to shut up.

The second link below should help if you need to know something about **Denis Lawton**. What may not be generally known is that he was a member of the **Politics Association** that worked hard, particularly in the 1970s and early 80s to promote what was called 'political education' or 'political literacy'. I was very enthusiastic about that work and say something about it in the following link.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/Frak8.pdf>

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/874632.Denis_Lawton

The Centre for the Study of the Comprehensive School (CSCS)

<http://library.northampton.ac.uk/archive/?p=collections/controlcard&id=5>

seems to have disappeared. It was a response to and a generator of enthusiasm for the spread of comprehensive schools. Anthony Crosland's Circular 10/65 encouraged the setting up of comprehensive schools but to Margaret Thatcher must go the credit for having created more of them than all other secretaries of state for education put together. If ever a Conservative knocks on your door asking for your vote you might wish to thank them for this.

CSCS held conferences, issued a newsletter and created a network. I, at any rate, pinched some good ideas from it.

Many of the other items in my fifth paragraph are explained in the document that can be reached via my first link, just before the blog proper appears. In that document I say nothing about DARTs so here is a link that might be useful.

http://www.ite.org.uk/ite_research/research_secondary_focus/006.html