

# **THE IMPROVISING TEACHER**

## **RECONCEPTUALISING PEDAGOGY, EXPERTISE AND PROFESSIONALISM**

**NICK SORENSEN**

**Reading this so useful, interesting and stimulating book I found myself making use of my personal professional prism. A professional life spent trying to make sense of far too much policy-making by non-professionals, particularly politicians, leaves me with a store of anecdotes. Nick Sorensen acknowledges the importance of professional anecdotes and while he is analysing, classifying and showing the significance of such stories as they relate to each other and to a body of theory I had to resist wallowing in my own. Allow me to share a few and, perhaps, reveal some personal philosophy.**

Let me start with a Michael Barber story. It was he who not only created the educational policy of New Labour but deeply influenced its approach to government in general. Known as Mr. Deliverology, his presentations were also caricatured by civil servants as 'Death by flow chart and bullet point'. He refers to teachers as 'instructors', as though their job is to tell young people what they must know, understand and be able to do. Discovering penicillin by accident would get no marks.

One day I was about to tell the Director of the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA) what I thought of Barber when he jumped in with, "He is my hero." I shut up. How, I wonder, do you place improvisation on a flow chart if you believe that it is the job of professional educators to instruct students so that they have only the knowledge, understanding and skills required by an approved curriculum and examination system? Maybe you can but it would not come naturally to me.

As a public examiner I learned so much from those responding to questions I had set. We called them 'stimulus questions'. It was the task of examiners to make sense of what was presented to them, not simply to count the ticks for 'correct' answers. Both teachers and examiners become learners when they respond to the improvisations of those that are officially designated as learners. And doing that in the classroom can be wonderful. My personal professional regret? I ought to have said more to them about what I was learning from those I taught.

This book of Nick Sorensen's goes deeply into the business of improvisation in teaching. At times we may all have had to wing it when, for example, shoved in front of a class you do not know with no time to prepare, but even then experience provides a professional hinterland to be called upon.

The book looks at Pedagogy, Expertise and Professionalism. I once asked a group of professional educators to tell me what word the first seven letters of 'professional' gave us. That was me improvising as I only had seconds to prepare what I had to say. I was, however, drawing upon a long-term interest in questions such as that.

Finding words to describe what a professional educator believes in is subject these days to official pressure. When Nick Gibb was Minister for Education he not only tried to interfere in the Advanced-Level Politics syllabus by removing feminism as an item but also told teachers that to allow criticism of capitalism in the classroom was extremist. Gibb was defeated in his attack on feminism, but it required a campaign to stop him. To narrow both the scope of the curriculum and the focus of the examination system is to constrain the improvising teacher.

In 1991 John Major made clear his opposition to question papers in the General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE) that allowed for differentiation by outcome, bringing about the tiering of papers, and also discouraging coursework. That, I believe, constrained improvisation by students.

I remember Kathleen Tattersall, when head of what was then the Northern Examiners Association (NEA) announcing to an assembly of Chief Examiners, gleefully I thought, that because the new GCSE in English was all course work girls had out performed boys. The general belief was that girls liked to get involved in the research that course work demanded.

As a jazz saxophone player Nick tells us that empty professional heads are no good at improvising. I am reminded of the story of someone asking directions, only to be told, "If I were you I wouldn't start from here." The improvising teacher always starts from somewhere. So do improvising saxophone players.

The book reminds us of a number of governmental educational initiatives. Let me mention two contrasting ones. Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) was a scheme that funded masters and doctorates for schoolteachers in England. It was devised, developed and annually evaluated collaboratively between a government agency and members of the profession. Up to thirty five thousand teachers annually registered to take part. They were writing about their professional interests, concerns and anxieties. They were critically reflecting on their jobs and also upon the impact of many governmental educational policies. They wrote a lot of words. The scheme was ended by government. My view is that government had no intention to open their ears to professional voices.

By contrast the Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL) was introduced as an official initiative. Despite professional attempts to develop it on a collaborative basis its legitimacy was not inclusive. It no longer exists.

Many of the examples provided in the book are specific to England but, I believe, relevant for professional educators all over the World. The struggle between official control and constraint and professional creativity is not confined to one country. Nurit Peled-Elhanan's book *PALESTINE in Israeli School Books, Ideology and Propaganda in Education* (2013) reveals how the forces that constrain and control can often be so effective that they become internalised and hardly noticed. The book of her academic colleague, Samira Alayan, *Education in East Jerusalem: Occupation, Political Power, and Struggle* (2018) reveals more obvious control and constraint and also a professional weakness demonstrating that power is not in the hands of the teachers.

Today in England, however, government is making a concerted effort to impose its own notions of how teachers not only qualify but also work as teachers. Universities with considerable experience of preparing and working with schoolteachers are under threat.

Nick Sorensen does not torture us with flow charts. He does, however, provide us with very accessible figures that help us make sense of the theme of the book.

Let me say what this book is not. It is not an instruction manual in how to improvise. It recognises the constructive complexities of improvisation and encourages teachers to become professionally enriched by the process. He takes us through so many attempts to define what it is to be a professional educator. One of my favourites was Expert Teacher, known usually as E.T. Imagine the fun that was had by professionals because the term Extra-Terrestrial could not be avoided when people worked out what it might mean. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained by re-examining those attempts to explore and articulate the varying and developing roles of the schoolteacher.

Sorensen brings to the term Expert Teacher and to others such as Advanced Skills Teacher more than a reminder of the thinking of the time when they were introduced. He adds important description and analysis that is useful today in more than one country. Having read his book I would love to sit down with Nick to discuss the belief of Lawrence Stenhouse that teachers are, or should be seen as, researchers. Stenhouse even proposed that Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) ought to be collaborators with schoolteachers in that research. Imagine that: the people who inspect you are also your partners in exploring what it is to be a professional educator. Gosh!

What I have written above is more of a response than a review. There is so much in this book that does far more than inform. I found it stimulating. It is both authoritative and supportive. It is also comprehensive. Not many books will give you jazz and Greek philosophy. It is not a passive book. Readers will bring much of themselves to the book.

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