

White coats and two dogs a week: teachers and research

John Yandell

What follows falls into two parts. Firstly, I want to look at the context in which the notion of teachers as researchers has arisen. Then I want to say a little about the possibility of constructing an alternative tradition of research.¹

A long time ago, before I became a teacher, I was a researcher. It was a strange life. I woke up most mornings (just), stumbled off to a library, did some reading. My reading consisted largely of the scripts of plays of justly-forgotten seventeenth-century playwrights.

It should have been a happy life, but it wasn't. There were two main sources of disquiet. Firstly I had a sense that it was time I stopped fooling around and found myself a proper job. And secondly I knew that I wasn't a proper researcher. You see, I shared a house with a friend who did real research, so I knew what it was. It wasn't going to libraries. It was two dogs a week. My friend Mark used to get up very early twice a week, pedal off to a laboratory, don a white coat, do interesting things to a dog's heart – and then slaughter the dog. The white coats arrived home with Mark, blood-splattered totems of scientific advance.

It all fitted neatly into everything I already knew about research. I think my main source of information on this topic was the adverts for washing powders which graced our television screens in the sixties and seventies. Research, I knew, was something to do with science, and was conducted in conditions of semi-secrecy by men in white coats. It dealt with facts and figures – lots of figures – and its findings could only be intelligently discussed, developed, controverted – and maybe even understood – by other men in similar white coats.

After a while I dealt with my disquiet by finding myself a halfway proper job and becoming a teacher. More recently, I have been involved in a small research project sponsored by the Teacher Training Agency. But I still haven't got a white coat, and I haven't been killing any dogs. So I still feel somewhat fraudulent. Perhaps the TTA police will charge me with impersonating a researcher.

A second, less autobiographical reason for this paper is the growing interest in teachers as researchers. The TTA project in which I was involved was both a manifestation and a cause of this. The immediate origins of this notion of teaching as a research-based profession lie in a paper by David Hargreaves, putting forward a set of proposals about teachers and teaching which are articulated around an analogy between education and the health service, and more specifically between teachers and hospital doctors.²

A number of things continue to bother me about the analogy and about what Hargreaves has to say about educational research and teachers. I think it's worth revisiting some of these concerns

now because the ideas which inform Hargreaves's contribution are being picked up, in a variety of different ways, by the present government, by its most prominent advisers and by a number of powerful agencies within education.

In seeing an analogy between schools and teaching hospitals - an analogy which seems to betray a preoccupation with the hierarchies of secondary schools, and to be simply irrelevant to any consideration of primary schools - Hargreaves developed a line which has been, and continues to be, very influential in reshaping initial teacher education.

'Theory is bad'

It links in with the last government's attack on teacher training institutions as bastions of progressivism, and on the attempts to redefine ITE (initial teacher education) as a kind of craft apprenticeship. Theory, in this approach, is to be counterposed to practice. Theory is bad, practice makes perfect. In an absurdist form, this approach is manifested in Sheila Lawlor's pamphlet for the Centre for Policy Studies, and the statements that what counts is that teachers should have a love for their subjects:

The good teacher has about him an aura of mystery remembered with respect, admiration and, at a distance, affection; linked forever with his subject and his singular way of imparting it. Although the good teacher is unique, he shares one characteristic with every capable teacher: a deep knowledge and mastery of his subject.³

I'm not convinced that this is enough to take one through 9C on a Friday afternoon.

Running alongside this version of the attack on theory is a much more sophisticated one, based not on some golden age of Mr Chips and his scholarly gown but on a more hard-edged managerialism. The problem with theory, in this version, is that it doesn't deliver the goods. What we want is results, and all theory does is to offer excuses. So, for instance, when research was published on the relationship between socioeconomic realities and education, David Blunkett dismissed it as a piece of 'LSE silliness.'⁴

It is this version of the attack on theory which underpins the new ITE curriculum, with its lists of competencies, its detailed prescription of what teachers should know, its explicit links with the National Curriculum. And it is this version which informed Anthea Millett's 1998 lecture at Keele University, with its statement that teachers should be less concerned about learning and more about teaching. I must confess that when I read this my blood ran cold. Pedagogy has become the key word. Teachers are supposed to be armed with lots of pedagogies and I'm not sure if I have enough. I fear that I may be as fraudulent in my claims to be a teacher as I am in my guise as researcher. I want to come back to this counterposition of teaching and learning, and to say a little about how research fits into the dichotomy thus posed.

But to return to David Hargreaves for a moment. What he says about the bulk of education research conducted within higher education is not that it's bad, but that it's irrelevant. It doesn't

communicate to teachers, and so it doesn't make a difference. To a significant degree, of course, this chimes perfectly with teachers' common sense view of teaching as doing - a view which is often shared by beginning teachers, who are both anxious to find out whether they can really do it, and also somewhat impatient with their lecturers' reluctance simply to tell them how to do it. It also seems perfectly proper to demand that the public money spent on research should be accountable: there should be a coherent account of what was done and why.

And yet it would be naive to think that this debate is simply about transparency. It's also about effectiveness, about being able to determine whether research is worthwhile or not on the basis of whether it made a difference. And I'm not sure that it is always quite so simple to make such judgements.

Hargreaves also has things to say about teachers. What we do in the classroom is too much a matter of intuition or habit: it is not based on established research findings. Teachers, moreover, are not like doctors because we don't communicate our findings to one another. One might question whether the medical profession presents quite so unproblematic a paradigm. Professor Smith, editor of the *British Medical Journal*, told the 1998 Annual Conference of Psychiatrists that only 5 per cent of scientific papers came up to scratch. In a comment which might well have some resonance in the sphere of education, he said that the key to greater clinical effectiveness was to involve patients in their treatment. 'Evidence-based medicine is a waste of time if patients feel they are not getting better.'⁵

In any case, though, I am not convinced that teachers really are as uncommunicative as Hargreaves alleges. We might not spend a lot of time writing or reading research papers, but there is a long and honourable tradition of teachers talking to one another, sharing problems, sharing materials, sharing approaches to all aspects of teaching and learning.

What has made such communication more difficult in recent times has been the erosion of our conditions: the increase in class sizes, the cuts in non-contact time, the ever-increasing imperative to dance to the tune of external agencies - such as Ofsted. And the other factor which has powerfully diminished our ability to share ideas has been the isolation of schools because of the undermining of the role of local education authorities through LMS and opting out, through the disappearance of advisory teachers and of teacher-led in-service training.

To criticise teachers for not behaving like professionals (whatever that means) when we have been deprived of any meaningful say over so many aspects of our working lives is, to say the least, rather strange. The point about the NUT's campaign against bureaucracy, in this context, is not just that we have been made to work harder but that we have been expected to do all manner of things which have made no sense in terms of our conception of what a teacher's role should be.

If one looks back to the 1970s and 1980s, to the work that was being done by classroom teachers, recorded and promulgated through journals such as *Issues in Race and Education* or

Multicultural Teaching, that work happened because of the space that existed – space for teachers to reflect on their practice, to develop ideas and initiatives which were genuinely responsive to the needs of their students and to the demands of the communities which their schools served. And what do we have now? The National Curriculum, SATs, the rigid formulae and narrow focus of the Literacy Hour, the demands of Ofsted.

Little wonder, then, that there is neither time nor energy left for such involvement. More than this, though, the imposition of a curriculum content, of external regimes of testing students and of assessing teachers, has inevitably led to a situation where teachers' conception of themselves and of their jobs tends to be a more narrowly-defined one. When I started teaching, I had to be able to justify to the students whom I taught why I was teaching them what I was teaching them. Now I can simply say, 'It's in the National Curriculum,' or 'It's in the National Literacy Strategy' or 'It's in the syllabus.'

Hierarchies

In such a different context, it might seem liberating that people in positions of influence - like David Hargreaves - are talking of teachers as researchers. It suggests that we might have more to offer than merely 'delivering' the curriculum, like so many sacks of coal, or potatoes, or whatever.

But we need to recognise that there is another dimension to the whole business of teachers as researchers and to the ideas which Hargreaves and others have been putting forward. It is not just that what is being proposed poses a threat to the jobs of teachers and lecturers within higher education; it is that it fits ever so neatly into a much more fundamental attempt to create new divisions of labour within schools. If the analogy between schools and teaching hospitals becomes not just an analogy but a blueprint for the restructuring of education, it becomes a way of exploiting existing hierarchies to create a small elite – the consultants or super teachers – and a larger mass of badly paid 'paraprofessionals' – teaching assistants.

There's a clear connection to be made here between the notion of teacher as consultant which Hargreaves proposes and the creation of Advanced Skills Teachers. Don't believe me on this point – have another look at the chapter in Michael Barber's book which puts forward his proposals on 'New Teachers for a New Century'.⁶ Barber's proposals yoke together the argument for 'A New Respect for research' with more rigorous appraisal, Advanced Skills Teachers and a tier of 'paraprofessional educators', flexible contracts and longer working days.

Mike Baker, the BBC education correspondent, had some interesting things to say about all this. 'Surely teachers have more to gain than to lose from setting aside national pay and conditions?' Apparently, what stops teachers from getting a decent salary is

the same thing that holds back nurses' pay: there are half a million of them. So a different tactic is needed... The advanced skills teacher could be the Trojan horse which gets inside the Treasury's fortifications.⁷

The analysis is one which reappears, in a more fully fleshed-out form, in the Green Paper, *teachers: meeting the challenge of change* (London: DfEE, 1998).⁸

There is another aspect to the current debate about teachers as researchers which also bothers me, and it is to do with what constitutes research.

Proper Research?

The attempt to radically redefine the teaching force is scary enough as a bread-and-butter, trade union issue: it's an overt attempt to undermine national and pay conditions, to further and fundamentally fragment the teaching force, to create much more rigid hierarchies. But this trajectory also depends on an equally radical redefinition of the relationship between teachers and students and between teachers and the curriculum. And this is where the question of educational research matters most, I think.

What I am about to say is not intended in any way as a disparagement of other teacher-researchers who were funded by the TTA, nor of the research which they undertook. But it seemed to me that there was a clear expectation of what the research projects would look like, and it goes something like this. You are interested in the effects of mentoring on, say, Year 7 students. Take two Year 7 groups. Test them in September. Give one group some heavy mentoring. Test both groups again in June. If the mentored group outperforms the control group, hey presto, QED, mentoring works to raise achievement.

Now this is proper research - the educational equivalent of my friend Mark and his two dogs a week. There might not be many white coats around, but there are figures aplenty, nice neat-looking statistics, and something which looks like a scientific procedure: samples, control groups, measurable inputs and outputs – and a conclusion.

It was clearly envisaged that the next stage of the process was that colleagues in other schools would seize on this research, replicate its procedures in their own schools, and thereby either validate or modify the initial findings. Again, it looks like the teaching world adopting the valid, reliable procedures of the medical or scientific community.

In microcosm, what such research does is to feed into (and feed off) the worst excesses of the school improvement craze. Show us your PANDAs and we'll tell you how badly you're doing. School A has an intake which, according to our data is comparable to school B. School A achieves more level 4s at KS2, or more A-Cs at GCSE. Ergo, school B is bad.

Within a laboratory or an operating theatre, it is relatively easy to establish cause and effect, to isolate and parcel up physical processes into manageable, bite-sized chunks. Within a school or a classroom, it is not. One of the minor points of continuity between the past government and the present one is their common distaste for the messy imprecision of the social sciences.

My own tiny bit of research – if research it was – did not escape unscathed from this pressure to

generalise, to make claims beyond what could be warranted by the scope of what had been investigated. Each of us teacher-researchers was expected to produce, in addition to an account of our research, a brief, snappy Findings paper - and it was the findings rather than the full account of research which the TTA undertook to publicise. The TTA's instructions on how to produce the Findings are worth considering.

The reader: assume that the reader is a classroom teacher, governor, officer, politician or journalist who wants to grasp the gist of your work quickly. He or she may get no further than the first page. TTA recognises the dangers of oversimplification. But the alternative seems to be to leave too many people ignorant about what your research can offer (TTA Research Findings, No. 1: Notes on preparing TTA research findings, 1996).

On the my version of my own Findings paper, I included, in big bold letters, 'A school-based case study'. In the version as published by the TTA, the phrase had disappeared. What I had presented as an account which focused on one department in one school in Hackney was in danger of being transformed into a statement about How to Teach Shakespeare – any time, any place, anywhere.

The notion of research as something which establishes, in some absolute sense, what works and what doesn't accords perfectly with the present government's relish for totalising discourses. There is the one and only true way to attain literacy, the one and only true way to teach geography, or whatever:

Amazingly, there has never been a major national initiative to enable all primary teachers to learn the most effective methods of teaching reading and how to apply them. The government has not created the structures or incentives to ensure that all schools learn from the best practice of the most effective schools. Instead, there has been a series of unconnected initiatives which, while usually worthy in themselves, have neither been interlinked nor had the scope or ambition necessary to tackle the problem across the country. If teachers are to change, they need opportunities to learn the best approaches and incentives to adopt them. Ultimately, we need a culture in which primary teachers themselves expect to adopt the best methods as a matter of professional pride.⁹

Good practice – a concept, or set of loosely connected ideas and actions that might possibly emerge as the product of experience and consensus amongst teachers has been displaced by Best Practice something which is established by a government working group, by a judicious mix of the great and the good (Chris Evans, Richard Branson) and an élite corps of super teachers. Best Practice is then disseminated in thick folders, or downloaded from the Net. And what teachers - the mass of teachers are then meant to do is to get on and mimic this Best Practice as best they can.

The imposition of the National Curriculum and testing took away from teachers and to some extent from school students themselves - any significant say in the content of the curriculum. The next phase goes one huge step further and prescribes how the curriculum should be delivered. And this is precisely what Anthea Millett is talking about when she says that teachers should be more concerned with teaching than with learning. Like so much else that is now in vogue, it

constitutes a technicist answer to the question of how to transform society. Educational standards are ratcheted up by telling us not only what to do but also how to do it.

It's a mighty convenient solution, if only because of what it leaves out of the picture. If what makes the difference is simply how well we do it - how well we measure up, on a Woodheadian scale, to preordained Best Practice - then to worry about resources, or class size, or anything else which might actually have hard financial implications, is merely to be distracted from our task - to seek excuses for our own poor performance. And if Best Practice can be reified, be given an existence and validated through the wisdom of the superteachers, then all that the rest of us need to do is to follow the guidelines. It's as easy as ABC. Which is odd, really, because when I first entered teaching there was a healthy scepticism about teacher-proof resources, an awareness that context mattered, and that the interaction between a teacher and her or his students was fairly central to the whole business of teaching and learning.

More than this, though, the model of teaching as an imitation of Best Practice has something very particular to say about equal opportunities. What it says is that equality is delivered by improving the quality of teaching - by turning us into better teachers, by making us more skilful practitioners. Not only does this imply that the problem in the past has been that we haven't done our jobs well enough, but also it implies that if we did our job better - if we implemented Best Practice - this would be good for *all* students. If we pay attention to our teaching, then the learning will take care of itself, seems to be the message from Anthea Millett. But will it?

Alternative Tradition

I have already referred to a different tradition of teachers as researchers, to a different way of reflecting on our practice. This alternative tradition pays close attention to the specificity of our students' lives and experiences. It unashamedly is preoccupied with how students learn. It is unwilling to draw a sharp line between the experiences of students outside the school gates and their experiences in the classroom. And it tends to take as a starting point that those experiences are not just useful material to be exploited in the classroom, but that students' identities are critically important as factors in the learning process. Indeed, the tradition to which I refer has sometimes dared to suggest that the structures of inequality which our students experience in their daily lives should themselves be the focus of our - and their - explicit attention in the classroom.

I want to inject a little classroom reality into this discussion. I want to describe a recent lesson, taught by a beginning teacher. The lesson happens at a school in Hackney, my school. The class is a year 10 GCSE group, mixed ability. Tony, the beginning teacher, is showing them a video. By a quarter past three - fifteen minutes before home time - the climactic moment has been reached. A mob gang up on an old man, publicly shame and humiliate him. It's a film with lots of cliched symbolism: at the moment of degradation, a heavy crucifix is placed around the old man's neck. He is forced to kiss it, as a sign of his submission. There is a big close-up of the

crucifix being pressed against his lips. From the back of the room, Claire says, fairly loudly and to no-one in particular, 'That's dark, that is. They're out of order.' An argument breaks out. Melissa and Terence don't see what the problem is, or rather, they blame the old man. He was asking for it too feisty by half. Neil isn't so sure. Like Claire, he seems to be on the old man's side. Soon most of the class have been drawn into this discussion.

I look at Tony's lesson plan, and there's no mention of a class debate on it. Oh, well, I think. An everyday story of Hackney schools. Not a proper lesson, anyway – certainly not 'literacy' as in *The Hour*. Kids in front of the telly on a Monday afternoon, and no proper work being done.

It sometimes scares me that most of those who talk most publicly about inner city schools like mine seem to have bought this version of reality, whether it's government ministers talking about zero tolerance of failure and unrelenting pressure, or anxious middle-class parents saying how much they would love to send their child to the local schools, but, well, their child is 'special'. and the schools round here are just not right for them.

If one is talking, seriously and honestly, about teachers. as researchers, it's worth thinking a moment about some of the contexts within which this classroom exists. Contexts such that it sometimes feels as if teaching and learning have themselves been marginalised – as if targets and testing, inspections and intolerance, were all that really mattered any more.

And this was, I suspect, part of the reason why the department in which I work was prepared to take part in the research project. What we wanted to do was to continue another tradition of telling, another of looking at what was going on in the classroom, than that provided by Ofsted reports or by league tables.

Meanwhile, back at Tony's lesson. The class had read up to the end of Act 4 in *The Merchant of Venice*. Tony was using this lesson to show them the court scene - the one where Shylock walks in expecting to carve a pound of flesh from Antonio, and ends up, thanks to the intervention of Portia, losing pretty much everything, including his Jewish identity.

Engagement

The argument that broke out a quarter of an hour before the end of the lesson seems to me to be a pretty good place to start thinking about Shakespeare in the contemporary classroom. What it represents, it seems to me, is a moment of intense and thoughtful engagement with Shakespeare. It continues a debate which has been going on for at least the last two centuries, about how *The Merchant of Venice* is to be read and how Shylock is to be played. But this debate, this lesson, and the reading of *The Merchant* to which this lesson is a contribution, is not just an engagement with Shakespeare - as if such an event could happen in splendid academic isolation. When the students argue about what happens to Shylock, they deploy, rework and challenge, consciously and in my view entirely appropriately, concepts of power and oppression, their understanding of

structures of inequality and of the relationship of individuals to such structure. Their debate simultaneously enacts and develops a much more serious discussion about racism and resistance to racism.

What I am suggesting here is not a project to dumb down Shakespeare, some futile attempt to make the plays accessible by recasting them as relevant contributions to contemporary debates. Nor am I arguing that it works in the classroom because boys go for the pound of flesh and the pint of blood. On the contrary. What I observed in Tony's classroom was a set of Hackney students behaving like real readers, grappling collaboratively with an uncomfortably difficult text, bringing their own consciousnesses to bear on its contested, slippery and unstable meanings.

Tony's lesson, as I have already suggested, doesn't exist in isolation. I would argue that one of the defining contexts for it is the set of shared understandings about teaching and learning – including teaching Shakespeare – that exist and operate in the department where I work.

From where I was sitting, this was a very successful lesson. It worked not because Tony had come armed with the right number of pedagogies, but because attention was being paid to learning, to what the students brought to bear on the particular text and to what they made of it.

The work which another Year 10 class had done in reading *The Merchant of Venice*, and my reflections on it, served as a starting point for the TTA-funded research project. The research – if I am allowed to call it that – took the form of a school-based enquiry into methods of teaching pre-twentieth-century literature, with specific reference to Shakespeare.¹⁰

The research grew out of the close relationship between the English department in which I work and the University of London Institute of Education – a relationship which has been developed over a number of years, principally through the placement of beginning teachers from the Institute in the school for their periods of sessional teaching practice. I was interested in the fact that any beginning teacher would be confronted with a range of practices, and the question of how such a spectrum of approaches might be represented.

I am aware, though, of another motive which lay behind my readiness to become involved in the research project. The school had undergone an Ofsted inspection in the Autumn Term, 1995. It had not been a particularly bruising experience, but it brought home the limitations of the kind of account which such an inspection gives of a school. I wanted to tell a more open-ended story, to go beyond the snapshot view which Ofsted inspectors receive (and transmit) and to attempt a long tracking shot, in which might be represented something of the histories which underpin current practices.

This notion owes much, of course, to a much longer tradition of school evaluation and enquiry, a tradition embodied in *Becoming our own Experts*.¹¹

This tradition exists: it simply is not good enough for Michael Barber to write off the late 1970s

and early 1980s as a period of ‘comfortable inadequacy’ in the teaching profession (1996a, p. 207). I started with a slice of autobiography, so I may as well end with one: it was precisely the dynamism of teachers in this period – particularly London teachers, I have to say their willingness to engage with questions which went far beyond mere pedagogical technique, which drew me away from an ivory tower.

What I am suggesting doesn’t mean that we should reject the whole idea of teachers as researchers: it means that we should be prepared to defend a much more inclusive, democratic tradition of educational research and development.

That is the positive note on which I wish to end. But I have a cautionary postscript. Tony – a really promising teacher in the making, though not one bedazzled by the Green Paper’s promise of fast-tracking - decided that he would not apply for teaching jobs at the end of his PGCE. In his view, the straitjacket imposed on teachers is too constricting to allow him to do what he wanted to do to help to meet the needs of students in Hackney. I think he’s made the wrong decision, but I understand why he has made it. Unless we are prepared to defend what I have gestured at here as an alternative tradition, people like Tony are not going to consider teaching.

Notes

1 This is an edited version of a paper given at the NUT’s National Education Conference, July, 1998.

2 Hargreaves (1996) ‘Teaching as a research-based profession: possibilities and prospects,’ Teacher Training Agency Annual Lecture.

3 Lawlor (1990) *Teachers mistaught: Training in theories or education in subjects?* Centre for Policy Studies, 1990, p.7. Lawlor goes on to use, before Hargreaves, the analogy that ‘Doctors must know medicine.’

4 Robinson (1997) ‘Literacy, Numeracy and Economic Performance,’ Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics.

5 See the account in the *Guardian* (24 June, 1998), p. 5.

6 Barber (1996a) *The Learning Game*, London: Gollancz, pp. 206- 238.

7 Baker (1998) *Times Educational Supplement* (19 June)

8 See the analyses of the Green Paper by Martin Allen and Ruth Martin, Mike Ironside and Roger Seifert, in *Education and Social Justice*, 1.2, Spring, 1999.

9 Barber (1996b) ‘A Reading Revolution: how we can teach every child to read well’ (The preliminary report of the literacy task force chaired by Michael Barber).

10 For an account of this research, see Yandell (1997a) ‘Sir Oracle’: *The Merchant of Venice* in the classroom’ *Changing English*, 4.1 and Yandell (1997b) ‘Reading Shakespeare, or Ways with Will’ *Changing English*, 4.2.

11 Eyers and Richmond, eds. (1982) *Becoming our own experts: the Vauxhall papers*, London:

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