



**Queensland University of Technology**  
Brisbane Australia

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## Reviews

### *Inquiry-based Professional Learning: Speaking back to standards-based reforms*

Graham Parr, Post Pressed, Brisbane, Australia, 2010, 253 pages,  
ISBN 978 1 921214 48 6, AUD \$65 (paperback).

#### Essay Review

*Inquiry-based Professional Learning: Speaking back to standards-based reforms* is an important book for teachers, researchers and policy-makers. Its publication comes at a time when, as author Graham Parr acknowledges, there is 'a rare level of international consensus' (p. 19) in educational debates on teachers' professional learning. This is because of a view – both widespread and wholly current – that teachers' professional learning has the capacity to improve schools and enhance the quality of students' learning. Indeed, Parr, himself, couches his own professional goal in these terms: 'Ultimately, my model of inquiry-based professional learning is focused on improving student learning and student well-being' (p. 23) – although, to be fair, Parr does eschew any simple cause-and-effect relation between the two. The emergence of this understanding of teachers' learning does present a (prior) question of how this way of thinking and acting has become possible – or *intelligible* (Miller and Rose, 2008) – in educational practice today. This is not a line of investigation, however, that Parr chooses to pursue despite invoking Foucault at various points and describing an adopted secondary research method as 'genealogical' (p. 107) – the Foucauldian method by which such forms of intelligibility are investigated. Instead, Parr locates the book's concerns within the realm of the political noting that such rare consensus 'dissolves rapidly in debates about conceptualising, planning for and enacting teacher professional learning' (p. 19). On this terrain, Parr stakes out the terms of the book's central argument: advocacy for an 'inquiry-based approach to professional learning' on the one hand – a term which gives the book its principal title – and a critique of government initiated, 'standards-based' reforms in teacher professional learning on the other – a term which gives the book its (more contentious, we argue) subtitle. Each of these dimensions of the book will be reviewed in turn.

'Inquiry-based professional learning', Parr informs us, is part of a 'long tradition of scholarship that critically interrogates and inquires into the possible benefits of dialogue, negotiation and conversation in teachers' learning' (p. 22). Key theorists associated with this tradition and whose work informs Parr's study include Mikhail Bakhtin, John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky (p. 22). Parr uses a range of methodologies associated with this tradition –

‘critical narrative inquiry, critical discourse analysis and reflexive autobiographical inquiry’ (p. 26) – to investigate not only the policies and professional practices of inquiry-based learning but also its ‘possibilities’ (p. 26). In this respect, Parr is not content with just ‘dialogic inquiry’; rather, his research draws on what he calls the ‘spirit of dialogism’. This, he explains, is where knowledge and understanding are considered as ‘emergent, contingent and unstable’ and research writing becomes a fundamental part of the process of inquiry rather than something which is done after the research is completed’ (p. 26). In this regard, Parr acknowledges his debt to Bakhtin whose notion of a ‘dialogic imagination’ (p. 27) represents a similar metaphysical source of inspiration and critique.

Parr sees his book as ‘complementing and affirming’ the burgeoning number of socio-cultural studies in education which ‘critically investigate’ teacher professional learning. In so doing, such investigations advocate for a professional learning that is school-based, but open to critical friends; extended over time; collaborative; inquiry-based (not constrained by standards); and reflexive (pp. 22–23). Parr’s study itself emerged out of a collaborative and extended school-based research project he undertook with a group of English Literature teachers engaged in professional learning at Eastern Girls College, Victoria, Australia – a group that later became known as the Literary Theory Inquiry Group. From extended dialogue with this group, a ‘provisionally finalised model for teacher professional learning’ (p. 188) and a number of recommendations emerged. These include planning for multiple places and spaces for teacher learning; valuing imaginative wondering, flexibility and interdiscursivity; grounding teachers’ inquiry in classroom practice; encouraging teachers to generate written or multimodal texts during their learning; and thinking of teacher professional learning as interrelated levels of intellectual, creative and relational work (pp. 221–222). While some aspects of these might appear as common sense to practising teachers, it is the focus on the activity of writing in professional learning that we found particularly insightful.

As a key part of his research into inquiry-based professional learning, Parr conducted a regular writing activity with his Literary Theory Inquiry Group. Significantly, this activity comprised reflective and introspective forms of writing. While one of the more important outcomes, for Parr, centres on the ‘truth’ or ‘valuable knowledge’ about teaching that such reflective writing is said to reveal – albeit always ‘mediated’, ‘provisional’ and ‘open to further dialogic contestation’ (p. 82) – another concerns a more mundane but nevertheless important point. The research, states Parr, demonstrates that teachers can use this type of writing in their professional learning over extended periods. It also shows that such writing can provide meaningful artefacts that ‘account for’ teachers’ engagement in productive professional learning (p. 22). From a different theoretical standpoint altogether – one more firmly located in the

Foucauldian tradition – the writing activity that Parr employed is significant as an ‘ethical practice of the self’ (Foucault, 2000, p. 232). That is, rather than revealing any truth or deeper knowledge about teaching, it may be understood as a practical technique by which teachers work on themselves – their *ethical substance* (Dean, 2010, p. 26) – to produce a particular, albeit negotiated, persona (e.g. ‘reflective practitioner’, ‘dialogic professional’, ‘life-long learner’). Given that such techniques are always able to be employed in the service of different *mentalities* of (self-) government, Parr’s research demonstrates that the production of different forms of (more autonomous and self-governing) professional personas is possible with teachers in schools.

Parr’s research demonstrates that such sustained and intensive writing practice in teacher professional learning is possible. Moreover, it shows that the artefacts it produces may account for professional learning as required by various authorities charged with regulatory responsibilities in teaching. That such techniques are always able to be employed in the service of different *mentalities* of (self-) government, opens the possibilities for the production of different forms of (more autonomous and self-governing) professional personas.

If the principal title points to the book’s strength, the subtitle points to its weakness. The theme of ‘speaking back to standards-based reforms’ refers to Parr’s ‘critical review of the ways in which standards-based reforms in the Western world [are] framing practices and structures for teacher professional learning ...’ (p. 23). Standards and standardisation practices have become key policy levers in education in recent years for addressing (programmatic) goals such as enhancing student learning outcomes and improving the quality of teaching. The release in February 2011 of the ‘National Professional Standards for Teachers’ by the Australian Institute for Teaching and Learning (AITSL, 2011) is the most recent and significant instance of this current policy trend. For Parr, however, such standards-based reforms are problematic. First, they foster ‘managerial’ understandings of ‘professional development’ (p. 187) which ‘ignore the context and setting of the schools and teachers involved’ and fail to ‘build on teachers’ existing professional knowledge’ (p. 20). Second, they draw on empirical research which seeks to measure the benefits of individual teacher learning. Such measuring, we are told, tends to be ‘done through quantitative analysis of student learning outcomes and/or analysing the particular teacher learning in terms of a teacher’s competence vis-à-vis some pre-determined set of standards’ (p. 20). Finally, such standards-based reforms are implicated in a broader, ‘neo-liberal’ governmental project – apparently universal and even in its effects – which not only threatens to ‘deprofessionalise teachers and teaching’ (p. 116) but has the potential to eventually ‘subsume all day-to-day teacher judgements beneath a central government edict’ (p. 116).

Parr’s claims about the standards-based reforms being pursued by govern-

ments are quite extraordinary; they are not exceptional, however, particularly from within sections of the academy. Much intellectual practice in education and the social sciences today still continues to adopt the ‘critical theory’ evident in Parr’s claims. Here we see a familiar narrative – in the tradition of Jürgen Habermas (1989) – which posits a dialectic between a pre-existent, liberatory public sphere and an increasingly oppressive and parasitical state. ‘Sociocultural [or human] emancipation’, such as that Parr claims for his own approach (p. 163), is a not uncommon promise. To be fair, Parr does reject what we may describe as the cruder forms of this type of analysis within the critical socio-linguistic tradition (p. 134). Parr is critical of their inherent ‘determinism’ with respect to the power of dominant groups and the ‘paternalism’ they imply on the part of the researcher (p. 134). Nevertheless, Parr’s own approach is still characterised by this critical dialecticism. The broad terms of his argument are those of the Habermasian critique of instrumental-calculative reason and its colonisation of the common life-world; the nuance in his argument is that of the Bakhtinian notion of the inherent struggle between the ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ tendencies in language (p. 134). The former term – centripetal – explains the tendency for language and culture to resolve into ‘monologic stasis’ (p. 134). For Parr, this applies when cultures are, for example, ‘in thrall to more dominant neoliberal discourses’: they are ‘more likely to reproduce practices and beliefs than to develop them’ (p. 134). The latter notion – the centrifugal tendency in language – describes the tendency for language and culture to fragment and for discursive practices to ‘connect dialogically’ with others (p. 134). Parr advocates stimulating this ‘centrifugal tendency’ so as to generate more ‘instability’ and ‘dialogic potential’ and thus open up ‘more imaginative possibilities for negotiating a way forward’ (p. 134) – towards what one can only assume to be secular salvation.

It is only in the final chapter of the book that Parr comes to realise something of the theoretical bind posed by this ‘critical’ approach. First, he shifts ground a little arguing that ‘while I have sometimes advocated a preference for one side of a provisional binary ... this has never come down to a simple matter of either recommending this approach or that approach’ (p. 220). Next, he seeks to soften his critique: ‘there may have been places where my critique of managerial policy and practice, and of standards-based reforms, came across as trenchant, to the point where the writing appeared more ‘authoritarian’ than ‘authoritative’ (p. 220). Finally, as if fighting back an uncomfortable realisation, he confides: ‘As I write this concluding chapter, I am still conscious of the need to avoid the research narrative overall becoming like a victory narrative ... with myself as victor’ (p. 220). Of course, by this stage, the tale has been told.

The difficulty that Parr faces in analysing teacher professional learning – in ‘speaking back to standards-based reforms’ – stems from his theoretical commitment to principle; that is, to the notion that the system of teacher

professional learning is or should be the expression of a fundamental idea or goal. Instead of viewing this system as it appears – that is, as an impure and tactically-improvised ensemble of practices assembled from different spheres of life and serving a mixture of ends – Parr insists on holding teacher professional learning up to ‘higher’ or ‘deeper’ principles. Following Hunter (1994), we can say that Parr’s argument is highly ‘principled’ in two closely related senses. First, it treats the existing (standards-based) system of teacher professional learning as the (partial or failed) realisation of principles such as democracy, equality and liberty. As the book makes abundantly clear on numerous occasions, teacher professional learning should ‘be a catalyst for change toward a more democratic community or society in which individuals and groups can be constructive participants, not just constructed parts’ (p. 163). In the place of such principles – repressing them and seeking to control teachers’ professional lives and their learning (p. 163) – is the one-sided, pathological advance of ‘technocratic’ reason (‘managerialism’) manifested in standards-based reforms. Of course, the point here, and one which escapes Parr, is that the governmental system of teacher professional learning cannot fail to realise such principles because it cannot attempt to realise them; they are located in another domain of existence far from the worldly objectives of government and its endeavour to achieve, albeit through clumsy and imperfect instruments such as ‘standards’, an optimal social training of the population.

The second sense in which the book’s discussion of teacher professional learning is principled concerns Parr’s own ‘principled’ ethical comportment. In claiming access to the deeper principles underlying teacher professional learning – as opposed to the merely ‘instrumental’, standards-based purposes to which it is put by government – Parr, like many enlightened scholars, conducts himself as a ‘principled’ academic. In fact, this is a persona Parr freely admits to cultivating: ‘there has been a principled position underpinning my distrust of managerial paradigms of professional learning throughout this book’ (p. 220). Such principled critical personas, in exercising their intellectual faculties, are in a position, it would seem, to see through the merely empirical (viz. governmental) reality of existing social systems – such as teacher professional learning – to its true form and principles. The mundane successes of governmental programs of teacher professional learning are rarely considered. While all political projects contain apparent and not so apparent dangers, a particular concern with dialectical critiques is their utter opposition to the practice of governing and an almost evangelical desire to liberate and emancipate. As noble as inquiry-based profession learning might be for Parr – grounded as it may be in ‘educational settings in which teachers participate’ (p. 9) – it may well prove a technology of domination for others.

Graham Parr has written a frank, engaging and widely-researched account of inquiry-based professional learning. It is topic about which he is both

passionate and knowledgeable – from the practical level of program design and implementation to the broader level of scholarly enquiry and research. As with any such field, there is a need for a diversity of programs and techniques. Parr's insistence on the 'dialogic and creative potential of language to engage in dialogic discursive practices' (p. 134) in the policy and practice of teacher professional learning will ensure that his own, as well as other such accounts and critiques, continue to remain part of the discursive field from which political rationalities informing and justifying particular programs are formulated. Despite the reservations we have in relation to Parr's argument, the research he has undertaken is vital for ensuring that the *zone of intelligible contestation* shaping how teacher professional learning might be thought about and enacted continues to remain vigorous.

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Peter O'Brien & Terri Bourke  
Faculty of Education  
Queensland University of Technology

### *Multiliteracies in Motion: Current Theory and Practice*

Edited by David R Cole and Darren Lee Pullen, Routledge, USA and UK, 2010, 276 pages, ISBN 978 0 415 80157 7, AUD \$48.95 (paperback).

While many scholars in literacy pedagogy have explored the complexity of literacy education, the New London Group provided a seminal paper in 1996 that explored the future of literacy pedagogy in changing social, cultural and technological times. *Multiliteracies in Motion* edited by David R Cole and Darren L Pullen provides a space for pre-service and in-service teachers to engage in the changing nature of the theory and practice associated with a pedagogy of multiliteracies, more than ten years after it was originally articu-

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