

**The Microphysics and Micropolitics of
Microscopic Meanings:
Situated Ethics and Professional
Workplace Pedagogy and Learning in
Venezuelan and Australian Universities**

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Abstract

- A crucial challenge confronting contemporary workplaces is finding meaningful ways to facilitate ongoing workplace learning. This is certainly the case in universities, where competing pressures on academics and managers require the learning of new roles such as social entrepreneurs (Anteliz & Danaher, 2004). These pressures reflect the ongoing need for attentiveness to the microphysics and micropolitics of university workplaces if such professional workplace learning is to be effective, efficient and equitable. That attentiveness reinforces the situated and politicised character of such learning; it also raises questions about appropriate forms of pedagogy to accompany and enable such learning.

Abstract(Continued)

- One potentially useful conceptual tool in articulating meaningful professional workplace pedagogy and learning in contemporary universities is situated ethics (Piper & Simons, 2005; Simons & Usher, 2000). Situated ethics eschews adherence to a timeless and universal code in favour of understanding ethical practice as contingent and located in the specific power grids of particular institutions. From this perspective, the ethical dimension of pedagogy and learning in relation to academics and managers must engage explicitly and hopefully productively with the aspirations and interests of members of the institutions in which their roles are performed.

Abstract(Continued)

- This paper illustrates this argument by reference to the authors' reflexive accounts of the dilemmas and strategies informing their efforts to participate in ongoing professional workplace learning. These dilemmas and strategies are framed by global, national and regional developments in socioeconomic policymaking, yet also enacted in contexts shaped by the microphysics and micropolitics of meaning making in their particular workplaces. The authors elaborate and apply selected features of situated ethics that underpin their respective and shared pedagogical approaches to facilitating their colleagues' and their own professional workplace learning.

Microscopic Metaphor

- “In the summer heat, a turtle plods across the baking highway. A woman careens her car aside to avoid hitting the turtle, but a young man veers his truck straight at the turtle, trying to run it over. He nicks the edge of the turtle’s shell, flipping it off the highway and onto its back. Legs jerking in the air, the turtle struggles to flip itself back over. Eventually it succeeds and continues trudging on its way” (“*The Grapes of Wrath* Study Guide: Chapters One–Three”; retrieved September 13, 2005, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/grapesofwrath/section1.html>)

Overview of presentation

- Conceptual resources
- Contextual elements
- Situated ethics and professional workplace pedagogy and learning in practice
- Possible implications

Conceptual Resources

- Situated ethics:
 - “...ethical principles are mediated within different research practices and these take on different significances in relation to those practices” (Simons & Usher, 2000, p.1);
 - “A situated ethics is local and specific to particular practices. It cannot be universalized...” (p.2);

Conceptual Resources (Continued)

- Situated ethics (continued):
 - “...we emphasize the inescapable necessity for making ethical decisions and the difficulty and complexity of such decision-making in situations where recourse cannot be had to indubitable foundations and incontrovertible principles” (p. 3);
 - “...making ethical decisions, in whatever situated context, is a process of creating, maintaining and justifying an ethical integrity that is more dependent on sensitivity to politics and people than it is on ethical principles and codes” (p. 11).

Conceptual Resources (Continued)

- Situated ethics (continued):
 - Simons and Usher (2000) summarised the major common themes of the chapters of the book on situated ethics as follows:
 - “* the challenge to universal principles and codes;
 - * the importance of being sensitive to socio-political contexts;
 - * the scope for being fair to disadvantaged groups; and taking account of the diversity and uniqueness of different research practices” (p. 11)

Conceptual Resources (Continued)

- Situated learning as a “general theoretical perspective, the basis of claims about the relational character of knowledge and learning, about the negotiated character of meaning, and about the concerned (engaged, dilemma driven) nature of learning activity for the people involved” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.33)

Conceptual Resources (Continued)

- “Lifelong learning is something which one does for oneself that no one else can do for one: it is a public and personal human activity, rather than private or individualistic. One of the features of the education system is the paucity of a language for learning as process and participative experience. Personalised learning requires a sense of the worthwhileness of ‘being a learner’ – a virtue in the 21st century. A sense of one's own worth as a person is essential to understanding one's identity as a learner. Research suggests **the human capacity to learn can be understood as a form of consciousness which is characterised by particular values, attitudes and dispositions, with a lateral and a temporal connectivity...**”

Conceptual Resources (Continued)

- “...This ‘consciousness’ has several dimensions which are all related to becoming a person, with a learning identity. They also enable the learner to become aware of and appropriate what is of worth and map onto the sorts of core values that learning communities espouse. Awareness of self and of one's own worth as a person is a necessary condition for ‘becoming a learner’ and for identifying and engaging with ‘what is of worth’. Furthermore, **a sense of self as a learner is formed in relationship, and understood as one learns to tell one's own story, as a participant in the conversation of the learning community.** Character is the way in which we refer to that quality of personhood in which there is rooted the capacity to change and learn over time” (Crick & Wilson, 2005, p. 359; emphasis added)

Conceptual Resources (Continued)

- So...the microphysics and micropolitics of microscopic (and macroscopic) meanings, understood as the intersection among:
 - pedagogy and learning as the search for meaning and purpose
 - situated ethics
 - situated learning
 - professional workplace pedagogy and learning
 - and communities of practicein Venezuelan and Australian universities

Contextual Elements

- Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV):
 - UCV Venezuela 's oldest university, founded by Royal Decree of King Felipe V of Spain in 1721 as the Royal and Pontifical University of Caracas
 - Currently more than 50,000 undergraduate students, 6,000 academics and nearly 8,000 non-academic employees
 - Nine faculties in Caracas, two faculties in the regional city Maracay, five distance education centres and 12 experimental stations throughout Venezuela

Contextual Elements (Continued)

- Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) (continued):
 - Provision for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students living in Amazonas and Delta Amacuro States
 - 1996 began Samuel Robinson Program, a social intervention program directed at students from low socioeconomic backgrounds
 - Instituto Tecnológico established in 1964
 - Coordination of Extension (= community outreach/service in Australian universities)

Contextual Elements (Continued)

- Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) (continued):
 - Two kinds of courses:
 - * short courses from 16 to more than 120 hours' duration covering diverse topics in engineering and related disciplines
 - * accredited programs (e.g., Transportation and Distribution of Natural Gas and Supervision of Civil Works), and through licensed agreements such as with the World Meteorological Organisation certified by UCV through the Faculty of Engineering
 - Brokerage of services for external public and private clients

Contextual Elements (Continued)

- University of Southern Queensland (USQ):
 - regional university with significant international student cohort
 - face-to-face, distance and online provision
 - current debate about funding, impact and quality of university research (linked with postgraduate education, including research training)
 - part of broader debate about the number and type of Australian universities (public and private, research - and teaching - intensive, serving different kinds of constituencies)

Situated Ethics and Professional Workplace Pedagogy and Learning in Practice

- Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) :
 - Particular challenges for situated ethics and professional workplace pedagogy and learning in conditions of political instability and economic hardship
 - Dilemmas and strategies associated with being academic entrepreneurs (e.g., opportunity to set different program and course costs for different clients)
 - Multiple forms of capital (e.g., UCV's name, strong infrastructure and intellectual capital) have contributed to genuine and widespread social transformation in Venezuela

Situated Ethics and Professional Workplace Pedagogy and Learning in Practice

- Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) (continued):
 - Political alliances and allegiances (e.g., elections of Rector, Vice-Rectors Academic and Administrative, Secretary of the University and Deans in Venezuelan autonomous universities such as UCV – a formal process that makes such alliances and allegiances explicit and therefore part of the politicised terrain in which situated ethics are enacted)
 - Important for the Coordination of Extension section to gain economic resources for the university, the faculty and the lecturers through the activities that it performs (e.g., brokering courses and programs); therefore its members are entrepreneurs who aspire also to be ethical and professional in terms of promoting workplace pedagogy and learning

Situated Ethics and Professional Workplace Pedagogy and Learning in Practice

- Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) (continued):
 - Pedagogical role in mentoring student assistants (opportunity for them to gain funds and work experience in working with lecturers to design and resource courses and programs)
 - The first named author's own learning: for Emilio, institutional and individual, and hence macro and micro, tend to be in alignment; he gains knowledge, experience and opportunities to develop professionally from his management and entrepreneurial activities, so the workplace microphysics and micropolitics are generally favourable

Situated Ethics and Professional Workplace Pedagogy and Learning in Practice (Continued)

- University of Southern Queensland (USQ):
 - Intensification of academic work – need to negotiate among multiple and sometimes conflicting priorities
 - Those priorities tend to be underpinned by a common set of values, yet framed by a tentative and provisional engagement with competing pressures (= situated ethics)
 - Recognition of, and responsiveness to, the complexity and multiplicity of stakeholders in contemporary universities, all with specific aspirations and not necessarily knowledgeable or concerned about the constraints on other stakeholders

Situated Ethics and Professional Workplace Pedagogy and Learning in Practice (Continued)

- University of Southern Queensland (USQ) (continued):
 - Rather than automatically favouring particular stakeholders (e.g., “students come first”), judging each case on its merits while striving to recognise the limitations of one’s own reflexivity
 - One example of the value and yet the complexity of working with students whose first language is not English (the potential for postcolonialism versus the perils of neocolonialism) (see also Potter, O’Neill & Danaher, 2005)

Situated Ethics and Professional Workplace Pedagogy and Learning in Practice (Continued)

- University of Southern Queensland (USQ) (continued):
 - Another example the multiple roles (e.g., advisor, advocate, assessor on progress reports) entailed in supervising research higher degree candidates (see also Danaher, Danaher & Moriarty, 2006)
 - The second named author's own learning: for Patrick, institutional and individual, and hence macro and micro, are not necessarily in alignment; he gains knowledge, experience and opportunities to develop professionally from his working with 'kindred spirits' and his often uneasy and guilt-inducing negotiation among excessive and competing pressures in ways that might – or might not – be sustainable in the medium- to long-term

Possible Implications

- Two further potentially useful pairs of concepts:
 - autonomous and heteronomous forces (Bourdieu, 1993) impinging on contemporary universities
 - teleological and ateleological approaches to design (Introna, 1996) and hence to managing pedagogies and learning

Possible Implications (Continued)

- Our focus on the microphysics and micropolitics of the microscopic – and macroscopic – meanings in our respective workplaces has highlighted some of the dilemmas and strategies involved in enacting situated ethics and professional workplace and situated pedagogy and learning in communities of practice in Venezuelan and Australian universities (e.g., ethical actions being contingent and provisional rather than based on general or universal claims)

Possible Implications

- Let's return to Steinbeck's turtle: an evocative and microscopic metaphor for the enduring search for meaning and purpose despite all manner of obstacles, pressures and uncertainties
- Pedagogies and learning can similarly be seen as both an instinctive and reflexive struggle for understanding of self and others in contemporary workplaces that can be encouraging and productive and/or hostile and alienating

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Thankyou forparticipating!

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