contextual **utility** and **practicality**

*Cultural Research for the School
Community in Hong Kong*

PO-KEUNG **HUI** AND STEPHEN C. K. **CHAN**

— Preamble

We were once puzzled by a complaint that a course on 'Self and Identity' we had proposed for a newly developed teacher training programme in Liberal Studies (LS) was too 'cultural studies' and therefore not practical enough for helping school teachers handle their adolescent students' pressing problems in personal growth (including an increasingly common inclination to suicide among many). *Practicality*, in this view, would have little to do with the pedagogical and intellectual activities that serve to facilitate and enhance critical understanding of the sociocultural conditions for the dynamics of the self—*contextual* factors which must have been crucial in shaping pressing problems for our young students and their teachers who care rather helplessly sometimes about 'self and identities' in the suffocating school setting.

Reflecting on this puzzling search for the useful pedagogy—for a set of practices in teaching 'culture' to a 'self' that could work for our students—we would like to ask us all to be frank enough to admit this: that the suffocating socio-institutional condition, be it school or university setting, is more often than not part of the problem, rather than of the solution. In this light, the pressing question posed to cultural researchers at large by that demand for practicality has a clearer implication. As an intellectual project, is cultural studies actually 'useless' in dealing with issues closely tied to students' everyday practices? For example, how can we deal with issues shaped and defined as 'adversities in life' by the institutionalised disciplinary codes passing 'specialist' (e.g. behavioural psychologist) judgment on such matters as juvenile suicide? In short, although this moralistic little comment ('how impractical, how useless!') should surprise no-one familiar with the intellectual and institutional histories of

our discipline, it raises an urgent problem about the meaning of practicality and utility in critical cultural studies *today*. In this article, we examine the problem through the case of teacher training and curriculum development in the context of educational reform in Hong Kong—in particular, through a community-interface project we are engaged in as cultural researchers at the moment.

Indeed, the utility and practicality of cultural studies has drawn much attention in the field during the past few years. For instance, at the Cultural Studies Association of Australia 2002 conference on 'The Utility of Culture and the Uses of Cultural Studies', its conveners Brett Farmer, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue claimed that self-reflexivity and a sense of productive anxiety are indispensable to the practice of cultural studies in ensuring its usefulness— its 'continued ability to produce new, self-reflexive modes of engaged knowledge and analytic thought'. They argued that, despite persistent anxiety about whether it is useful (enough), 'real-world utilities' have long been a major concern of cultural studies. Optimistically, they do not consider this anxiety 'a mark of disciplinary immaturity or failure', but see it as 'a productive sign of the field's continued growth and its refusal to succumb to intellectual or political stagnation'.[1] Others have argued for locating reflexivity as a *methodological* key to Gramsci's 'ensemble of relations', underlining the significance of approaching relations of power and inequalities in cultural forms and strategies through the practice of cultural studies,[2] or reiterated the uses of cultural *theory* for the critical understanding of a range of everyday, cultural and political practices.[3]

While we do not disagree that cultural studies is 'useful' in heterogeneous ways, let us point out the obvious by saying that, in our view, not all the critical practices currently found in the name of cultural studies (whether within or beyond the academy) are usefully self-reflexive. That said, we believe it is still crucial to attempt to re-articulate reflexivity as a methodological principle in the contemporary uses of cultural studies,[4] taken as a critical practice concerned with examining the complex process of meaning-making in relation to the institutional nature, function and structure of the kind of knowledge production thus involved. For our purpose, however, we want to adopt a slightly different, more pragmatic, approach to the question of use. We shall take 'utility' to be the *capability to attain the goals of a project*, and 'practicality' *the degree to which the specific tasks accomplished via a project would allow one to move closer toward a broader vision*. Alignment between specific tasks and a common vision would be crucial here. For often, utility and practicality are equated with the way 'things get done', or worse still, with how one keeps oneself 'busily occupied' at all times without asking if a single effort made leads effectively to any project goal. Hence, the more restrictive definition of utility and practicality we adopt underlines an ethical imperative for us: in any project of cultural research, we must 'discipline' ourselves by defining pragmatically the scope and aims of our tasks at hand, thus linking them specifically to its larger

goals and vision. This would in turn require us to be truthful and concrete about the limitations of a particular plan and condition of research, thus saving resources by not committing time and energy toward activities that are tangentially relevant to the target.

With this understanding in mind, we want to argue that cultural studies can indeed be useful and practical in the contemporary Hong Kong context. Drawing on our experience in the community-interface project with schools with which we have been involved since 2004, we shall suggest how cultural (educational) research, if conducted carefully and effectively, could generate a productive dynamics to correspond with the vision of educational reform now widely circulating in the local community of Hong Kong. At a time when new subjects such as Integrated Humanities (IH) and Liberal Studies (LS) are being introduced into the school curriculum, projects in cultural research can pragmatically address, analyse and help resolve the concrete everyday problems that teachers and students confront, and provide them (along with the other so-called 'stakeholders' such as parents and policy-makers) with critically informed understanding of the contexts in which that reform is supposed to work, together with any practical suggestions needed to help them deal with the issues at hand.

We are well aware, for example, that one of the most pressing problems with Hong Kong education today is the lack of motivation and confidence among many students. Working in an academic department that offers the only Bachelor of Arts degree in Cultural Studies in Hong Kong, we have been concerned at Lingnan University since 1999 with exploring an effective set of critical pedagogies to facilitate *student-centred learning*, nurture *critical thinking* and develop *transdisciplinary multiple perspectives*—objectives all shared by the current education reform.[5] But one may still ask: 'Why cultural studies?'. One major issue we face constantly with our undergraduate students is their common misunderstanding of cultural studies, as they come to us from their secondary education; they take the subject to be more or less a version of the study of 'Chinese culture' or 'world cultures'. Most students will take two or three years to *un*-learn what they have acquired from their schooling, which has no doubt made them very afraid, bored and confused.[6] With such pedagogic issues pre-set on our own agenda in cultural studies education we are increasingly anxious about pragmatic transformation at any stage of schooling. Certainly, we are also preoccupied with a vision for some alternative, sustainable environment emerging from our schools to prepare students to take on cultural studies more energetically, and happily, as a university subject. With hindsight, we might say that the current educational reform has given us a golden opportunity to start a cultural studies-oriented project on precisely that sort of transformative process in pedagogy at the schools. Our purpose is therefore to explore the meaning of 'utility' and 'practicality' for cultural studies by drawing out the productive links between cultural research and critical pedagogic projects based in the local community. While reflecting on its potential

as a teaching and research program interfacing with community issues on the ground, we want to analyse contextually the useful and practical dimension of cultural studies in dealing with the social and pedagogic impacts of educational reform on the school community, through the case of curricular development in the IH and LS subjects.

— The social and pedagogic context

Since the mid-1980s, Hong Kong (HK) has been subjected to a series of dramatically evolving changes brought about by re-organisations in the economic and political orders across the globe. Today, as China's Special Administrative Region (SAR), the post-colony has evolved with an added dimension of deep social, cultural and political uncertainty. After the historic mass demonstration that took place on 1 July 2004, the seventh anniversary of the establishment of the HKSAR, when around 500 000 people marched on the streets from Victoria Park to the Central Government House on a day of an all-time record temperature of 35°C, we have no doubt that the community of Hong Kong has realised and demonstrated how the extraordinary fate of our social futures must involve some thorough re-alignment of individual efforts in relation to collective experiences and common resources.

Certainly, under the new global economy today, what 'collective experiences' and 'common resources' represent cannot be taken for granted. To meet such a challenge, it is evident that our education system (on which we work, and with which we survive) will have to react promptly, persistently and consistently through structural, curricular and pedagogical transformation. Ever since it came into existence in 1997, the HKSAR government has been active in reforming the education system, with emphasis on the secondary school curriculum. Driven by the hegemonic discourse of the 'knowledge-based economy', the thrust of the reform was set in 2001 when the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) issued *Learning to Learn: The Way Forward in Curriculum Development*. As its title suggests, the CDC document projects a future based upon the cultivation of students' learning motivation and ability, with the keywords framing the thinking of most reformers spelt out in terms of: *creativity, adaptability, lifelong learning,* and *whole-person development*. These novel qualities, according to the educational authority, are now the prerequisites for anyone to 'succeed'. Accordingly, the contents and teaching methods of core school subjects such as Chinese and English have been revised with the aim of nurturing such qualities. Even more strategically, new subjects such as IH and LS are introduced for similar purpose to replace old ones in both junior and senior secondary classes respectively. Riding on the tide of the school reform, university departments (including Cultural Studies at Lingnan) have become more involved in various educational and developmental projects on the new IH and LS curricula.[7]

Not knowing that we might well be following the footsteps of earlier cultural studies practitioners such as E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall in the

efforts they made for critical adult education, we worked very hard to set up the *Master of Cultural Studies* (MCS) programme in 2003. Two years later, we started the *Postgraduate Diploma in Liberal Studies* (PDLS) program in an attempt to provide training for teachers of the new IH/LS subjects. In the meantime, we have continued to run pedagogic workshops for local teachers and conducted research projects to evaluate the implementation of the IH/LS curricula at the school-level. Relating our work to the earlier tradition of community engagement in cultural studies, we see the kind of adult educational projects we engage in as *useful*, not only for initiating a relationship of critical dialogue with secondary schools, but also in generating indirectly a quasi institutional, quasi community-based learning and developmental network for the students of cultural studies. The latter would make room for better understanding and uptake of the cultural studies project in the (school) community sector, along with the shaping of a more *practical* model of student-centred, inquiry-based learning that could help teachers to address the real problems associated with the conventional schooling process, which have long been seen as part of the legacy of British colonialism in Hong Kong.

Hence, in what follows, we shall attempt to re-think the critical, effective functions of cultural research and its productive links to the shaping of public life in the specific social and educational context of Hong Kong. This will be handled in two parts. First, we shall outline the particular cultural research and school-based project we have been involved in. Then we shall analyse the interface between research and the community (secondary schools) by raising a set of contextually framed issues questioning the pragmatic and institutional condition of cultural research and development. In all, we want to examine the problems of cultural research in light of its utility and practicality for the sorts of projects we believe cultural studies should be engaged with locally today. In doing this, we hope also to generate some interests and concerns in the changing field of humanities education at large, especially for those of us also engaging with critical applied scholarship of some kind in our work.

— Curriculum reform in practice—the case of two local schools

It must be made clear at the outset that the primary aim of our school-based research is not so much the management of the IH/LS curricular reform narrowly conceived, as the overall *cultural process*, as it were, in which the divergent and multi-layered factors affecting the actual implementation of the reform operate in the specific institutional complexity we try to identify, map and analyse. Now, in educational reform, the utility and practicality of any contextually grounded cultural research must translate into its effectiveness in helping us to see, understand and examine the common vision aspired to by the many 'stakeholders' involved. In our IH pilot research project, in order to know if the reform is effective in facilitating students' 'all-round development', we have tried to link its long-term educational vision to concrete operational objectives, thus putting the question to all the parties involved to

assess unambiguously if a school-specific reform program actually works in accordance with the projected vision.

Thus, ours is a project that focuses on the complex process of meaning-making for its divergent 'stakeholders', including all the unintended effects and consequences being produced in the local context of a 'liberal state'. Accordingly, the first critical question for us as cultural researchers is to outline how any reformist vision is appreciated, interpreted and handled by the diverse groups of members of this state-instituted reform program framed in the discourse of some version of 'liberal education'. On this basis, we look at the extent to which the various efforts put into the reform serve the agreed goals and objectives, which should in turn reveal the utility and practicality of a specific program. Significantly, in our research at the two local schools, we have been unable to find any clear and commonly accepted vision among the educators, students, and parents of the (school) community.[8] This absence of an unambiguously shared vision is the first crucial problem we have to deal with. Also lacking is a distinct set of criteria to evaluate objectively whether a particular reform program has been operating on the right track and for the right objective. Before long, we could discover that we are left with a situation whereby teachers, school administrators, and government officers have little in common when it comes to ways of assessing the effectiveness of the reform. It is not uncommon to find that resources have ended up in areas that are not really on target. The lack of transparent procedures and productive division of duties also worsens the situation. The ineffectiveness of a reform program, finally, is crystallised in the tendency among the bureaucrats-educators to measure 'usefulness' by a number of quantifiable indicators, rather than by its contribution to the overall development of students' learning abilities, which must be part of the ultimate reform vision.

In the official 'vision' IH is described as 'a research and development project which adopts a relatively comprehensive mode of curriculum integration' at the junior secondary level.[9] Two reasons are given for introducing IH in the first three years of secondary education (S1–S3): to reduce the overloaded contents and overlapping themes of the existing school subjects, and to introduce *multiple perspectives* to students so as to cultivate *critical thinking*, *an open mind*, and *a collaborative spirit* in the learning process. Hence, it is argued that the existing mode of teaching and learning must change from a content-based, teacher-centred approach to a *student-centred, inquiry-based* mode of learning.[10] In Hong Kong, this new mode of pedagogy has long been promoted in response to the declining motivation and confidence in learning among students.[11] Public opinion today seems to have accepted that this is a move in the right direction given the particular kinds of local problems we have had to live with. While it is undeniable that the effects of the inquiry-based approach are yet to be seen, and reservations about the effectiveness of student-centred pedagogy are made in many other countries,[12] we still see good reason to give reform a chance in light of Hong Kong's

unique colonial educational history. For this is a case in which students' self-confidence and motivation to learn have been significantly and progressively ruined by schooling practices. If planned carefully and implemented effectively, we do believe that the reform should improve educational quality, and open up a space for cultural studies' intervention in educational transformation. In other words, we are critically concerned at the moment that an effective IH/LS reform should leave the local community (and the cultural studies practitioners in it) with an opportunity to test the usefulness of cultural studies and cultural research in Hong Kong's educational context, within which we have designed our two school-based projects, as follows.

Since 2000, the Curriculum Development Institute (CDI) has worked with three local 'seed' schools to develop packages of the junior secondary IH teaching materials.[13] An average school adopting 'English as Medium of Instruction' (EMI), School A, one of the seed schools, introduced IH in 2000–01; by 2002–03 IH had become a required subject for its junior forms (S1–S3). School B, while not a seed school, is a vocationally oriented institution that started its IH at junior forms in 2002–03. Invited to evaluate the effectiveness of the school IH reform, we did our fieldwork at School A in April and finished the report in August 2004. At School B, our research began in January and evaluation was completed by July 2005. Aside from observing classes and teachers' meetings, we conducted group and individual interviews with students, teachers, parents, and the principals, and were given the teaching materials and minutes of the IH subject meetings at both schools to read.[14] On the basis of these research data, we have been able to make three significant observations.[15]

First, the reasons for implementing IH (S1–S3) are diverse among the teachers and senior administrators in both schools, and some of them do not match the stated objectives of the reform. Whereas School A aimed initially to cut the number of courses and make the contents more relevant to students' everyday life, School B wanted to develop their all-round skills and abilities so as to meet the new demands of the 'knowledge-based economy'. At School A, one important consideration for the senior administrators when offering IH was the language of classroom instruction. As an EMI school, all subjects offered (except Chinese) have to be taught in English. Since it was not a 'top-band' school, using English as the language of instruction at the school would weaken motivation in student learning. Significantly, even the EMI schools are allowed to teach IH in Chinese. So, after consulting the teachers, the principal decided to integrate four existing subjects into the new IH (to be taught in Chinese), simply to make everyone's life easier in the classroom. On the other hand, with a keen concern to strengthen their competitiveness for new challenges, the principal at School B wanted to enhance vocational training and nurture in its students the relevant general capacities (from creativity and communication to problem-solving skills). As we have seen, the teachers' attitudes toward IH at both schools ranged from strong resistance or indifference

to full endorsement. Even for those who were highly committed to IH, pedagogical aims and priorities varied a great deal. From this it has become evident that without a set of common, clearly prioritised goals, policy implementation would run into all sorts of problems.

Our second observation has to do with the fact that none of the parties involved, neither CDI, nor the principal, nor the teacher, had a definite idea about how to assess objectively and critically whether the IH curriculum had been running well. No wonder some of the students and teachers we interviewed had indicated that they were becoming mentally stupefied. In the absence of shared priorities in curriculum goals and shared criteria for evaluating the reform, teachers tended to come up with a range of divergent (sometimes conflicting) judgments. In the name of school-based development CDI adopts a 'non-intervention stance', while school administrators often held narrow perspectives toward the reform program. Indeed, it would not be inaccurate to say that the IH implementation at both schools had been totally disoriented. This is remarkable considering that School A has been recognised as the most successful 'seed school', while the IH development at School B was supported by a Quality Education Fund from the Government.

The third point we want to make concerns the actual teaching and learning of the subject. We have noted that the IH teaching materials produced by CDI did not always match the expressed objectives of the reform. Much of the material consists of worksheets, and yet most of these would amount to little more than reading comprehension exercises, where students were asked to provide factual questions to extracts of a text taken out of context. Thus, the overall pedagogic outcome relates minimally to students' life, and was therefore mostly ineffective. Furthermore, the way some teachers conducted class discussions was also counter-productive to student-centred learning. Here is one common characteristic we observed in the classroom: teachers rushing to provide the 'correct' answer in class, without allowing enough time and space for students' participation in open and free exchange of ideas. As a result, students' views were largely contained, if not ignored. Some teachers have also in effect discouraged students from taking any active part in discussion by over-emphasising classroom discipline. Worse still, they relied frequently on test and examination, assessment tools that call for short-term memory as the form of study. This, on top of the fact that the worksheet contents were often stale and uncritical, meant that students could hardly benefit from 'critical thinking' and 'inquiry learning', supposedly the key concerns of IH as a reform subject.

As we must conclude from the above that what Schools A and B have accomplished differs significantly from what the reform promises, it becomes impossible for us to judge whether the reform policy has brought about its intended outcomes. For one really has to admit that the curriculum reform as envisioned by the CDC policy document has never taken place! In this case, criticising the reform as putting too much emphasis on critical pedagogy

or a student-centred approach would be missing the point. Similarly, it makes little sense to say that the work done by teachers, their school, their students, and the CDI officials is *practical* or *useful*. For without a clear common vision, or an effective planning, implementation and evaluation process, it would be absurd to insist that what we have gone through at the ground level (in the school, at the classroom) is either 'useful' or 'practical' in the terms we have earlier defined. On the other hand, cultural research that aims to locate the problems and identify measures to resolve them can be productive when we begin to take seriously its utility and practicality as a critical project with policy implications.

Having been trained in conventional disciplinary scholarship and conditioned for years by a 'teacher-centred' school environment, most school teachers lack the knowledge, confidence and capacity to adopt a dynamic 'student-centred' pedagogy in dealing with subjects of a transdisciplinary nature. Neither are the school administrators and educational officials equipped with the intellectual resources and project management capacity to run the reform curriculum. This lack of pragmatic critical expertise in operating the reform has provided cultural studies with a new opportunity to act. To generate an effective outcome for cultural studies as a *usefully critical* project, what we need to develop and institute next is a whole series of follow-up mediations—translation, communication, and even direct intervention. Through our pilot study, we have come to see how expertise in intellectual work, effective planning, project management and critical pedagogy must form part of a holistic package in order for effective reform to take place.

This is where cultural research can be useful, as it presents through a project such as the school-based evaluation study a substantial set of questions which we will identify in the next section, drawing on the institutional, contextual and micro-technological issues in the curricular reform process. The kind of critical pedagogic work we attempt to institute is integrally tied to reflexive studies in education aiming to reveal the multiple perspectives involved both in the shaping of critical thinking inside the classroom and in the shaping of the pedagogic project beyond the classroom, in the broader reform context. As cultural studies practitioners, we hope to be able to play a dual role with our research project thus conceived: surely we can do so as experts in the field of new transdisciplinary subjects such as IH or LS, but hopefully also as critical cultural mediators working with teachers, students, school administrators and government officials, as well as other specialists in the business, education and community sectors. To implement a curriculum that fits the vision of the educational reform, we must work pragmatically but strategically with ways of bridging the gap between intellectual–professional considerations and technical–business orientations. To do that effectively, cultural researchers will need to articulate useful technical knowledge (ranging from pedagogy to project management) and professional knowledge (IH intellectual contents) to ethical–political considerations. We would also have to translate the latter in

ways that strengthen the material conditions for effective reform. In short, it is critical for us to connect and mediate different kinds of expertise and strategy with the educational work at hand. In that process, as cultural researchers we could begin to play the role of what Tony Bennett calls 'cultural technicians', working within specific social and pedagogic contexts that concern us.[16] For only in making 'connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession',[17] could we move our project productively with, and within, the changing social contexts around us and make critical cultural (educational) work useful and practical again for the community we care about.

— RETHINKING THE CRITICAL USES OF CULTURAL STUDIES

While the evaluation research on the effectiveness of reform that we did with the IH curricular implementation serves to test the utility and practicality of cultural studies for the school community in the context of the Hong Kong's latest socio-economic changes, the paradigmatic shift in the cultural studies project we learn from this research would now require us to foreground the complex technology of the reform—referring here to the operational dynamics, consequences and implications of the educational reform itself as the *cultural process* we must study in detail.

In any cultural process today, collective experience and common resources play a key role, especially in their framing of the social and life conditions for the shaping and production of individual experiences. Ulf Hannerz argues in *Cultural Complexity* that the individual is increasingly immersed in and mediated by 'a flow of externally available, culturally shaped meaning' which now influences one's particular shaping and structures the order of the complex experiences, intentions and meanings making up the world we live in. As each 'individual version' of a culture represents a particular share of the collective an individual can offer to society, the individual shares of a culture are held as a collectively owned and binding 'structure of meanings'.[18] This provides clues to the ideology underlying the renewed interest in the dynamic individual as a crucial social resource adopted in the rhetoric of the new cultural economy. It also sheds light on the intellectual perspective to our strategic take on the pragmatic role of 'culture' (and of cultural studies) in the kind of social reform undertaken by the public institutions we discuss here.

Bearing in mind what Hannerz refers to as 'a network of perspectives' for understanding the new form of individuality today, scholars and educators might begin to approach the unprecedented complexity of collective experience by taking this new form as a key to the changing social connectivity that has, in turn, re-shaped and re-configured the individual

in contemporary culture. This, we believe, must be one of the most important concerns of cultural studies in our time.[19] It is the aim of critical scholarship and education in the age of 'new humanism' to operate in accord with this changing configuration of knowledge and subjectivity, and thus help bring into action the younger minds and bodies today, people whose fair share of that collective structure will have to be more effectively and fruitfully activated.[20] This is the context against which we must re-assess the new social and pedagogical functions of cultural studies as a prosaic discipline and evaluate in a constantly unsettling, reflexive mode our general agreement with the explicit tenets of the discourse of educational reform.

In her introduction to the first joint research workshop between the Centre for Cultural Research at University of Western Sydney and the Department of Cultural Studies at Lingnan University held in Sydney in 2002, entitled 'Exploring the How of Cultural Research', Ien Ang asks a fundamental question—'What is it we *do* when we do cultural research?'—and provides us with a telling albeit simple answer: as 'knowledge producers' in society, we reveal 'how different strategies of knowledge production relate to each other'.[21] In order to do just that, she seems to suggest, not only should we take seriously the object of our research—culture—by recognising it properly as *a process*, but also we will engage ourselves actively and reflexively with *how* we do what we do, i.e. with the very process of doing cultural research. Hence, in the present case, the various processes of knowledge formation must be contextualised in the classroom, the curriculum and the wider school sector, respectively. Each group of stakeholders would approach knowledge from a very different perspective, fully embodied in tactics of a distinct kind. The specific practice concerned thus ranges from the use of a particular worksheet, a particular mode of teaching and learning, to a certain pedagogic objective a teacher sets inside or outside of the classroom. As researchers involved in the production and circulation of meanings, we must be fully aware of and critically concerned about the institutional nature, function and structure of the kind of knowledge we help put in place via our work.

Hence, the basic critical task at hand with our schools is to examine how such work can allow us to understand and cope with the *complexity* in the particular context of cultural processes involved. Let us discuss this by way of three questions that we have had to face at crucial points throughout the research and training workshop, and thus reflect on the problematics of cultural research as a critical project: the question of critique, the question of expertise, and the question of ethics. By doing so, we want not only to relate theory to practice, but more specifically and importantly, to try to articulate the politics and pedagogy of cultural studies to 'the circumstances of its most immediate institutional settings' in the local social and educational context of Hong Kong.[22]

How do we offer, deliver or make useful our critical position: a. by way of the pilot research on the school; b. through the training workshop and the design of a new Postgraduate Diploma in Liberal Studies programme and c. by taking part in the curriculum reform process as a whole?

The challenge that faces a cultural research project would consist of crucial intervention in the following areas of practice:

a. First, the project would provide the schools, the policy-making bodies and the community at large with research-based analyses on the effectiveness of the new curriculum implementation, taking into account the different kinds of impact the latter has on the various 'stakeholders' (students, teachers, school administrators). This kind of school-based intervention becomes most useful when mutual trust and respect is developed between the research team and the school. Whatever critical functions we may perform must therefore be conveyed and made effective in ways that are appropriate to the circumstances and dynamics of the local case.

b. It follows that the research would also provide teachers at the training workshop with the appropriate intellectual background, exemplary teaching materials and critical pedagogic skills needed for delivering the new subject matter in the classroom. The offer by our Department of Cultural Studies of a transdisciplinary *Postgraduate Diploma in Liberal Studies* at Lingnan University, with an interface with our *Master of Cultural Studies* program, aims precisely to facilitate long-term intervention in the building of a learning community of teachers inclined to critical, cross-professional exchanges. Such development will be not only critical and useful but also enlightening and practical because the network can help individual teachers address their daily work problems in the local school context, while opening up a space for them to reflect on their everyday practices against the backdrop of the larger educational goals and vision they hold.

c. Finally, the researchers would be able to work closely with the policy-making bodies and stakeholders from various social domains at both the strategic and tactical level by offering critical and effective (again 'usable') input in the course of curriculum design and formulation.

There is still another, very pragmatic dimension to practices discussed under point a., which by virtue of its usefulness for schools would pose an acute challenge for the effectiveness (practicality) of our critical tools, methodology and intervention as a whole. This involves the development of localised commentaries on the course materials teachers adopt for the classroom. Here critical intervention may work on two levels: first, by way of the review and re-formulation of classroom worksheets and examination design; then, at the

next, more pragmatic level, through the project team's collaboration with the school in the development of new pedagogy and course materials (e.g. on media, leisure and consumption, popular culture, self and identities, or globalization). Certainly, in undertaking all these 'interventions' on the different levels, we must be fully alert to the possibilities and limitations in the different pedagogical situations that constitute the primary contexts of these practices.[23]

— 2. THE QUESTION OF EXPERTISE

How can we best apply our disciplinary expertise and develop it in ways that would benefit the community in question, and at the same time create new insights, even breakthroughs, for the understanding of the cultural process/formation at issue?

Here, in the first instance, expertise manifests itself in the ways we reveal to the various 'stakeholders' (teachers, school administrators, bureaucrats, policy-makers, scholars) how knowledge productions are interconnected dialogically, i.e. how knowledge producers, properly recognised as such, are given the opportunity and right to relate to each other as partner 'stakeholders' in any single domain of social practice. Attempts must be made to articulate one set of perspectives to another, especially since the consequences of such 'dialogues' are not readily recognised under normal circumstances, when communication among different groups has been inadequate and ineffective. As we have seen, one main strategy we take is to engage with multiple perspectives and to examine the process on many levels—on the macro level (of education as social reform), the intermediate level (of the individual school), and the micro level (of the pedagogic tactics or tools used in a classroom).[24] Of course, we do this to contextualise the contradictions and tensions involved. Significantly, our research reveals the conflicting and sometimes irresponsible roles played by the government bodies in charge. The need for identification and analysis of such loopholes at the many practical levels of a public policy (such as the education reform) is the sort of problem we can bring out with our project, as much in the general *formation* of public culture as in the particular *work* of the civil, (post)colonial bureaucracy.

Yet it has become obvious in the course of our research that inadequacy and ineffectiveness are not confined to any single group of the community. The complex formation of identities, sensibilities, and indeed of 'core values', must therefore be re-examined in the process of learning and teaching, whereby each individual (group) involved must now be prompted to learn, teach, understand, appreciate and negotiate how, as Hannerz puts it, the contemporary world is becoming one in which people live together amidst a variety of multiple perspectives that are themselves (necessarily biased) 'perspectives toward perspectives' of others, who are often just as biased.[25] This is something that happens in spite of talk about a certain 'cultural turn' in our global economy. It is indeed crucial for all of us interested in the work

and value of cultural studies to re-think critically pedagogical practices in the context of the global fashion for 'market niche', 'human capital' and 'areas of excellence'. Meanwhile, a more serious question emerges. It has become increasingly clear and critical that the very writing of our evaluation reports for School A and B might indeed have an impact on the morale of the school teachers, subject panels and administrators, as well as policy formulation at the school level in the immediate term. This leads us to our third critical question.

— 3. The question of ethics

How can we be sensitive to the diverse needs of the various groups of people affected by the reform, without compromising our own critical judgment as cultural researchers? In other words, how can we guard ourselves against any kind of ethocentric bias when we choose to work in our project with the students, the teachers and the government officials involved in the complex and multiple process which is the planning and implementation of critical educational reform?

Now we can appreciate how culture in the world is made up of a 'network of perspectives' rather than any one single perspective. More often than not people still end up living by a more or less coherent set of codes and values nowadays. But as they manage to do so through engaging with others in the *complex* social process, we must not assume that uniformity or conformity would be the natural outcome. The process of cultural negotiation in the world today might reveal something quite different: namely, that in contemporary cultural formations, whereas a whole range of linked and overlapping perspectives interlock complexly to form what today we call a society, there are none the less urgent needs for the re-negotiation of the individual's relationship with the collective. Negotiation here *works* through the interplay of the complex of individual perspectives, each on its own course in trying to make sense of the others' variant outlooks on the representation at issue.[26] If 'perspectives' on life are indeed 'the device which organizes the attention and interpretation which an individual gives to externally carried meaning', then a new orientation to critical pedagogy and cultural research must be developed to map, explore and (de-)regulate that 'tension zone between culture and social structure'.[27]

Hence, engagement with such a network of multiple perspectives and factors in social connectivity becomes crucial in defining the new possibilities and domains of cultural studies in light of the changing institutional conditions of its existence.[28] So our question is: in the process of community interaction, *how* does critical intervention that is useful and practical in our sense occur for cultural research, if at all? Working on the issue, we are mindful not only of the role of the researchers, but also of that of the various agents whose daily practices in the community are at stake, and whose troubling experiences are subject to discursive representation in terms that would appear rather strange to their lifeworlds. All such agents, we should not forget, are themselves individuals with understandably biased, hybrid and

multiple perspectives of their own. (Such an individual may be a student, a teacher, a subject coordinator, a senior administrator, a school principal, an official in charge of reform, a policy-maker, or for that matter a cultural researcher.) The multiple roles and perspectives involved must be re-examined in the complex process of engagement, interaction and negotiation, whereby each group will have the chance to express its experience and voice its opinion, in ways that would be *answerable* to another's expressions and opinions.

In the end, cultural research becomes critical the moment it starts to make the inevitably complex process involved *dialogically* productive for as many groups or perspectives concerned as possible. And in doing so, we believe it is highly desirable that we 'discipline' ourselves in laying claim to the specifics of our own critical methods and procedures. Cultural studies, as Tony Bennett insists, 'should lay claim to a definite set of knowledge claims and methodological procedures that will be convertible into clearly defined skills and trainings that will prove utilizable in a range of spheres of practical life. However, this can only happen if [it] renounces its aspirations to being a knowledge without limits … and seeks, instead, to become a discipline'.[29] In this sense, the utility and practicality of our critical work must also be articulated to a *disciplinary* project of ethics.

— Concluding remarks

We have tried to contextualise the critical but constructive links of cultural research to the shaping of educational policy in the context of school reform in postcolonial Hong Kong. On the basis of our pilot study, we have examined cultural studies' engagement with the local (school) community in terms of policy-making, implementation and its pragmatic implications for policy and community intervention. In our discussion, we have also highlighted the relationship between critical pedagogy and cultural planning with regard to the institutional condition of research, management and development in contemporary culture as an inter-connected network or field of study.

Drawing on this contextualised analysis of the Hong Kong school reform, we may now see how the utility and practicality of cultural research consists in offering us a methodological platform to examine the possibilities in more aspects of public cultural practices than we have so far recognised in cultural studies. Responding to Richard Johnson's seminal essay 'What is Cultural Studies Anyway?', Bennett has urged that the task of defining cultural studies be 'reinterpreted as the need to devise ways of integrating different disciplinary perspectives into a moving method which will achieve greater forms of completeness from the point of view of understanding the cultural process as a whole'.[30] We propose that, practiced both as a teaching and a research program interfaced with community and public cultural policy dynamics of various kinds, cultural studies is indeed an experiment in such a 'moving method' engaged in the very process of *our own critical–pragmatic transformation*.

The method is moving, self-reflexive and transformative not just for us as individual scholars, asking the kinds of question we outline here. It should also be moving, reflexive and transformative for us as a collective dealing *institutionally* with the complex interplay of critical functions, social resources and cultural experiences in our various disciplinary practices, handling strategies of knowledge production as they come to us from across disciplinary borders, and as they affect and shape our work as academics from within the pragmatic frame of our intellectual project.

———————————

PO-KEUNG HUI teaches in the Cultural Studies Department of Lingnan University and is the Programme Director of its Postgraduate Diploma in Liberal Studies. His main research interests are education and cultural studies, cultural economy and alternative development. He is the author of *What Capitalism is Not* (Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 2002, in Chinese) and he is working on several research and development projects on education reform in Hong Kong. <pkhui@ln.edu.hk>

———————————

STEPHEN CHING-KIU CHAN is Professor and Programme Director of the Master of Cultural Studies (MCS) at Lingnan University. He is the general editor of the *Hong Kong Cultural Studies* book series (Oxford University Press China, 1997) and his current research covers cultural planning and policy, cultural research and liberal education, and transnational imagination in action cinema. <sckchan@ln.edu.hk>

———————————

1. Brett Farmer, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue, 'High Anxiety: Cultural Studies and Its Uses', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2003, pp. 358–59.
2. See Richard Johnson, Deborah Chambers, Parvati Raghuram and Estaella Tincknell, *The Practice of Cultural Studies*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 2004, p. 53.
3. See Angela McRobbie, *The Uses of Cultural Studies*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 2005, p. vi.
4. On reflexivity as an engaging methodological principle, see the lucid discussion by Nick Couldry in *Inside Culture*, Sage Publications, London, 2000.
5. We are aware that the educational objectives of 'student-centred pedagogy' and 'critical thinking' have been the focus of serious debates in many parts of the world. Yet, in the contemporary Hong Kong context, as we shall argue below, it is still important to pursue these educational aims with careful planning and implementation.
6. John Holt, *How Children Fail*, Pitman Publishing, New York, 1964.
7. Our attempt is surely not the first of its kind. Drawing on Carolyn Steedman's discussion in 'Culture, Cultural Studies, and the Historians', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London & New York, 1992, pp. 613–21, Tony Bennett points out that engagement with the English secondary school history curriculum reform was during the early days of British cultural studies an important moment in its formation. See Bennett, *Culture: A Reformer's Science*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, pp. 49–51, 223–24.

8. Elsewhere, we have studied the diverse perceptions of the reform with an analysis of the public discourse on the new school subject LS. See Stephen Chan and Po-Keung Hui, 'Perspectives on Cultural Policy Study as a Critical Project: Some Implications of the Liberal Studies Educational Reform in Hong Kong Schools', paper given at the Cultural Studies Seminar Series co-presented by the Department of Cultural Studies and the Kwan Fong Cultural Research and Development Programme at Lingnan University, 9 November 2004.

9. Curriculum Development Council (CDC), *Personal, Social & Humanities Education: Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1—Secondary 3)*, Education Department, Hong Kong SAR, 2002.

10. The CDC has decided that IH should adopt 'an open and flexible curriculum organization' according to 'school-based needs'. This means schools are free to choose any model of integration to match individual contexts, from combining the existing humanities subjects to preserving all the independent subjects. They are encouraged to adapt, improve and supplement available pedagogic resources in accordance with their particular contexts, while the Curriculum Development Institute (CDI) would take on the responsibility to develop general packages of teaching materials for IH. See <http://cd.ed.gov.hk/pshe/ih-www/en/index.html>.

11. One recent survey on 15 000 students in 23 secondary schools conducted by scholars at the Hong Kong Institute of Education suggests that the longer the schooling process, the more serious the problem in the loss of learning motivation and self-confidence among students (See *Mingpao*, 7 March 2005).

12. In the case of language teaching and learning in the Australian context, for instance, B. Cope and M. Kalantzis in *The Powers of Literacy: Genre Approaches to Teaching Literacy*, Falmer Press, Philadelphia, 1993, also try to think through how cultural research could contribute to the development of new educational practices that go beyond the binary opposition between traditionalism and progressivism in educational discourse.

13. By July 2004, however, only one of the three seed schools (called School A) had successfully completed a full three-year cycle of the curriculum, i.e. by integrating all four existing school subjects into the new IH, namely Economics and Public Affairs, Geography, Chinese History and World History.

14. Now the IH curriculum contents at both schools cover 'Understanding the Self' and 'School and the Community' (S1), 'Contemporary China' (S2), and 'the World' (S3), with teaching materials largely adapted from resources developed by CDI.

15. For details see the two reports by the IH/LS Research Team of the Kwan Fong Cultural Research and Development (KFCRD) Programme: *Research Report on the IH (S1–S3) Implementation, I and II* (in Chinese), KFCRD with the Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, Hong Kong, 2005 and 2006.

16. 'Cultural technicians', for Bennett, are people who modify 'the functioning of culture by means of technical adjustments to its governmental deployment'. Apparently, this formulation seems to downplay the role of cultural critique, for to change both teachers' and planners' consciousness is by no means less important than 'technical adjustments'. See Tony Bennett, *Culture: A Reformer's Science*, 1998.

17. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Vintage Books, New York, 1996, p. 76.

18. Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, pp. 64–5.

19. For a discussion of its relevance for cultural studies see Couldry, *Inside Culture*, Sage Publications, London, 2000, pp. 98–104.

20. For a recent investigation of the impact of the new cultural economy discourse on the disciplinary transformation and educational re-orientation of cultural studies in the Australian context, see Terry Flew, 'Creativity, the "New Humanism" and Cultural Studies', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, June, 2004, pp. 161–78. The author admitted that he was prompted to write the article after hearing Meaghan Morris's keynote address at the 2002 Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Conference in Melbourne, where she drew on her teaching and research experience at the Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, Hong Kong.

21. Ien Ang, 'Introduction: Exploring the How of Cultural Research', Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, 2003.

22. Here we echo Bennett's pointed critique of the 'low degree of institutional self-reflexiveness on the part of much cultural studies theory and a corresponding incapacity to relate (without reducing) the theory and the practice, the politics and the pedagogy of cultural studies to the circumstances of its most immediate institutional settings', Bennett, pp. 51–2.

23. Bennett, p. 12.

24. On the framework for a multi-level strategy in research, policy and practice, see Stephen Chan and Po-Keung Hui, 'Redesigning Critical Pedagogy in the Era of Knowledge-based Economy: The Case of Hong Kong', paper presented at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, 30 May–1 June 2005.

25. Hannerz, p. 67.

26. Hannerz, pp. 6–10; see also Couldry, p. 102, drawing on Hannerz's notion of cultural complexity.

27. Hannerz, p. 65.

28. '[C]ultural studies does now need to be fashioned into a disciplinary undertaking of a more conventional and recognisable kind … To propose a disciplinary future for cultural studies … is to envisage that, in arriving at a greater degree of definiteness about itself, cultural studies will recognise that, like all other knowledge, its domains and possibilities are circumscribed and limited by both the theoretical and the institutional conditions of its existence', Bennett, pp. 41–2.

29. Bennett, pp. 52–3.

30. Bennett, p. 57.