

## What Education Studies is and what it might be

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### Abstract

*Education Studies at the University of Greenwich is presented as an example of what Education Studies is – at least at one Higher Education Institution. As a field of practice to which a body of knowledge can be applied, Education Studies shares common features with other disciplinary fields of study. It is also unique in that its field – learning, is also what its students do – learn. What Education Studies isn't is then discussed in relation to studies of schooling, the psychology of learning, sociology of education, traditional education degrees and teacher training. Lastly, what Education Studies could become is presented with reference to Ranson's (1993) argument for the centrality of education as the common focus of all HE study. It is suggested that the subject could then contribute to expanding critical space in (higher) education through making research/ scholarship and creation an integral part of the Independent Study of all students at all levels of learning. This would be a necessary complement to the wider democratic transformation now demanded for human survival. It would also accord with what Marx called humanity's "species being" as a "learning animal" (Morris). Such a social theory of learning can discriminate between information and competence at one level of learning and (corresponding terms) knowledge and skill at another more generalised level in relation to new divisions of knowledge and labour. Potentially these levels can be combined to create a new form of polytechnic learning, relating theory to practice, education to training and further to higher education.*

**Key Words:** *Education Studies, foundation degree, teacher training*

### Introduction

This paper examines what Education Studies is – at least as far as this is known to the author. It then discusses what it isn't (Sociology of Education, Learning Theory in Psychology etc.) and, lastly, suggests what it could become in a future that Education Studies could contribute to sustaining.

### What Education Studies is

The University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) lists 698 courses at 69 universities and colleges, including one at Cambridge, some at 94Group universities but the majority at Million-plus institutions. While Ward (2006) has undertaken a survey of all these courses, Education Studies at the University of Greenwich is presented here as an instance of the subject without any assertion of how typical this is.

Education Studies in the School of Education and Training at the University of Greenwich is a BA degree programme that has grown remarkably with a changing student body since its inception in 2000. Initially it recruited mainly mature students (25 to 30+), whose numbers grew rapidly by word of mouth recruitment and most of whom were employed in primary and secondary schools as teachers, often with extensive experience and responsibility but who lacked a degree qualification. These students included a smaller number of overseas-qualified teachers, some asylum-seekers and refugees, many with considerable experience but with qualifications not recognised in the UK. The programme continues to recruit such teachers, some working in schools and some not, who also require a degree for entry to the various forms of post-graduate teacher training eventually entitling them to equitable remuneration. There are, in addition, smaller and constant numbers of younger overseas students. Over the last two years all these students have been joined by other mature students, many of whom are not qualified teachers but Learning Support Assistants (LSAs). These LSAs also seek a route to degree qualification to avoid relegation to permanent teaching support status. Under the government's 1998 proposals to remodel the teaching workforce, a two-year, competence-based Foundation 'degree' was started and was delivered in local FE colleges. So far, this Foundation "degree" has mainly been taken by small numbers of school administration staff who then transfer into the main degree programme in their third year of study. At Greenwich there are also increasing proportions of younger, overwhelmingly female, students on the course and from the academic year 2004-5 they have become the majority. These students enter the programme mainly through "clearing", with the University filling the places regardless of the qualifications of applicants. The students seek a back door into primary teaching which, in reality, they will be lucky to find in the current labour market. The degree does not give them a subject specialisation for secondary schools unless they combine it with another subject, as some do.

Further change in this student body can be anticipated as fees rise and if the Foundation "degree" grows as an alternative for LSAs. In this way, as well as being a 'widening participation' course for students who previously would not have entered or perhaps even thought of higher education (HE) as 'a possible future' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, p. 3), the programme is typical for large parts of further and higher education today in its volatility and uncertainty from one year to the next. However, the Education Studies degree programme provides opportunities for continuation of a 1960s form of polytechnic teaching in the tradition of the institution. Potentially, the Education Studies degree programme relates theory to practice in the classic manner by building upon students' own school and college experiences, whether as practising teachers and/or as recent or past students. Indeed, there are already opportunities for those not working in schools to undertake paid "taster courses" in primary and secondary teaching, though these are not compulsory. In these senses the programme can be seen to derive from the Open University as well as the polytechnics and, in particular, to radical approaches within these latter to relate theory to practice through Independent Study. The most radical of these, in the former School for Independent Study at the neighbouring University of East London, began as a means of qualifying local people to teach in local schools (see Robbins, 1988).

Education Studies at Greenwich also has the potential to combine a suite of courses/modules that are currently mainly offered separately to related Early Years, Childhood Studies and Youth and Community Studies students. This would be in accord with the *Every Child Matters* agenda for integrating professional services for children. However, the study of education as a field of practice in which knowledge drawn from various disciplines can be applied also establishes it as the same as any other field of study or HE discipline. As such, its graduates can claim the same level of generalised knowledge as any other graduates.

What Newman (1907, p. 113) called this 'knowledge of the relative disposition of things' is – in the contemporary jargon – “transferable” to other contexts, especially those occupations involving the increasingly common feature of “learning” in some form or other. It is one role of Education Studies to open these possibilities to its students.

However, in comparison with other subjects of study, Education Studies enjoys the advantage of combining the object of study – education – with reflection upon the process of study so that what students study is also what they do (study studying). This point is repeatedly made to the students who, from the beginning of the course, are encouraged to learn from one another; especially from overseas students whose education may have been very different, as well as from Combined Studies and older students. It has to be said though that such mutual learning is not facilitated by the part-time nature of this ‘full-time’ course. An attendance requirement of only one or two days a week derived from its origins servicing employed teachers, plus students’ disparate travel and work arrangements (both those employed in schools and those working “part-time” elsewhere) offers little time for the socialisation necessary to sustain a campus-style student community.

Meanwhile, the natural inclination of lecturers on the course is to recreate a traditional four-year Education degree like those replaced at many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by the three-year Education Studies programme plus one-year teacher training. Thus, the lecturers highlight their own academic and research interests in the canonic components of a traditional Education degree: philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. They see this as a way to sustain their research interests by informing their teaching with them as well as to teach through research (Jenkins, 2004). Core courses therefore introduce students to education research through case studies and a rehearsal of research methods linked to consideration of various approaches to research, culminating in students’ own research project in their final year.

As stated above, all of Greenwich’s Education Studies students could be defined as “widening participation students” but whether it is possible – in the words of the spoof slogan adopted by a previous programme leader – ‘to raise quality whilst widening participation’ is posed as a practical research question, as well as a pedagogic one, for teachers on the programme. Its answer, of course, depends upon the definition of quality and, since formal examinations have been replaced by course work for all courses on the programme, space has been opened for quality to be redefined in investigative projects and other assignments. At the same time however, while the presentation of course work eliminates the teaching of exam technique, it still results in students being marked for qualities of literary presentation (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and academic style – in the fetish universally made of the Harvard referencing system, for instance (Ainley and Canaan, 2005) – rather than their knowledge of what they are writing about.

Many of the younger students are the most reluctant and, along with some of the overseas-educated students, most unable to meet these apparently arbitrary demands, especially the reading that is expected of them. Their constant plea is: ‘We only want to be teachers; why do we have to do all this?’ The student instrumentalism universally complained of by HE staff today is most evident amongst students who, on the one hand are a product of a school system that encourages, as a final year Education Studies project recorded in 2004

*‘Students to connect their self-esteem and what they may achieve in later life exclusively to their exam results. Over assessment in schools has made subject knowledge and understanding a thing of the past as school students*

*are put through a routine year after year, practising what exactly to write and where in preparation for exams.'*

and, on the other, who also feel that they are 'lucky' to have 'made it' as far as they have. The attitudes of several students and their occasional opinions suggest that, if they keep their heads down and do the minimum required, they should end up with entry to what they anticipate will be secure employment as opposed to the 'shit-work' they undertake – supposedly part-time but actually more or less full-time – to pay their way and maintain a compensating lifestyle.

Such attitudes do not encourage critical thinking about their situation. Many of these mainly female students are therefore reluctant to engage with any of the statistics of education, for instance, not only because they share a widespread and gendered distaste for mathematics but, more fundamentally, due to aversion from contextualising the "choices" they believe they have freely arrived at in the determination of their futures. They counter references to the influence of social factors with the assertion 'We are all individuals' and 'There are always exceptions' – excuses for not thinking, on a par with the schoolboy's 'Brain hurts, sir!' There is thus a resistance to reflecting upon how you *Become What You Are* (Wexler, 1992) which is surely essential to any serious study of education today, given the part that institutionalised learning now plays in nearly everyone's life.

Similarly to their teachers, the older Education Studies students, while as motivated as the younger ones to complete the course for vocational reward, are less inclined to profess that all is for the best in the best of all possible self-chosen, meritocratic worlds. Instead, they see schooling from a teachers' and, in many cases also, a parents' point of view, as well as from the greater personal experience they possess of a changing education system. As teachers their perceptions are modulated through the defensive notion of professionalism against reduction to wage labour adhered to by the teachers' unions and the profession generally, though it should be added that notions of 'professionalism' are also changing (see Ainley, 1993). More reflective, experienced and articulate, these older teacher-students tend to agree with George Bernard Shaw's estimation that 'Education is wasted on the young'. They are a dwindling minority, however.

Education Studies at Greenwich, like other degree programmes, aims to provide independent communicational space (Habermas in McLean, 2006) in which generalised concepts can be rationally tested in argument and by experiment. This ideal higher education is seen by many academics as providing students with the conceptual tools and mental skills to question received ideas through 'critical thinking' and to test their own hypotheses, ideas and claims to truth against the relevant criteria, whether of scientific experiment, logical proof, scholarly or more directly social research, or technical practice. Students then supposedly graduate to Mastery of their respective subject disciplines or, as in the case of Education Studies, to areas of practice in which they are able to defend in the wider world the conclusions they have arrived at in discussion with fellow students and teachers. They can therefore acknowledge the point at which their truth claims no longer depend upon proof but are a statement of faith or an admission of prejudice. Nor can they deny that their thought is in some sense ideological, that it is – as well as a more or less adequate conception of the reality with which they are dealing – expressive of an interest in, or perspective upon, that reality. Moreover, that their choice of perspective, or means of ordering the information they have acquired, is, as well as an aesthetic, logical or practical choice, also a moral and political judgement that may require further experimental endorsement as well as rational agreement to find a wider acceptance. Such discussion is encouraged by teachers who themselves learn from representing their understandings

based upon research in the subject communities to which they belong. Many courses and programmes of study in HE are based upon this implicit model.

It is less certain that many students encounter and understand their programmes of study like this! Notes the author happened to take of a recent uncharacteristically small, but otherwise fairly typical, year-two seminar discussion offer a flavour of student conceptions but perhaps also present the germ of an alternative HE (as developed by Ainley, 2007). The seminar aimed to discuss a lecture by another member of the course team on Foucault and following it there were five Education Studies students present (two 30+ primary LSAs (A & B), one 20+ 'returning to learning' following career change (C) and one (the only male) refugee 40+ (X), plus a younger student who says nothing at this point but whose written work shows she is at least passively participating in seminars). The rest of the younger students are absent as they often are, especially from seminars.

*A: The way I see it [what the lecture was about] is we can all see things from different points of view.*

*B: You might read something and think it was like this but someone else might read it and think it was from another point of view... but we would have preferred to do it from our own point of view. How does a theory become a theory anyway?*

*C: The reading [she is the only one who has read this prior to the lecture] showed how a subject became a subject with the examples of psychiatry and geography.*

*B: But if we're trying to be researchers why do we have to have to look at things through their eyes?*

*C: Because one theory is that you're never really going to be objective so it's up to you to know a little bit about each one to know what to draw on in different circumstances... The view I'm taking is more from what I've read than from the lecture so I do see how power/knowledge could be important.*

*X: You can be marked down because of many things in your standards in education.*

*B: Like in the new citizenship curriculum.. That's a form of social control.*

*[All agree, although it should be added that the seminar leader later questions this unanimity but at this point was too busy writing down what the students were saying!]*

*C: Foucault would probably throw the whole thing [citizenship] out of the window. That seems rather negative.*

*A: That's what I said about theorists!*

*B: But not all theorists are as depressing as this.*

*A [interrupting:] It's so we can be governed.*

*B: There's no way out of it.*

*X: Only through God's Grace.'*

### **What Education Studies isn't**

An -ology; it is also definitely different from the study of schooling, though I suspect that is what it may become if staff teaching experience prior to HE is largely restricted to schools rather than to Further Education (FE) or training in employment. Yet Education Studies should define education more widely as learning, even though this pushes it towards a sub-field of one or other school of psychology. Nevertheless, I would borrow from a psychologist the widest possible definition of 'learning or conceptual change as a kind of adaptation in a

larger dynamic system' (Hutchins, 1995, p. xvii). The question then becomes: what is the larger dynamic system to which the learning in question is adaptive?

This of course leads us to sociology – another thing that Education Studies isn't. As Michael Young warns, 'in relation to the far greater regulation of standards and the curriculum that schools of education now experience, the reforms to teacher training are in danger of preparing teachers to be technicians' (1998, p. 163) thus proletarianising the teaching profession. This technicisation evacuates theory from what were referred to above as 'old-style Education degrees' (another thing Education Studies isn't) or pre-Teacher Training Agency PGCEs and leaves the sociology of education, as 'a little regarded subsection of academic sociology' (*ibid*). However, as Mike Savage has noted, the sociology of class was kept alive in the sociology of education. Indeed, it is – as Stephen Ball (2006, p. 55) records – traditional to it since 'British sociology of education had its beginnings in... the London School of Economics... driven by the methods and politics of the LSE [that] placed education as part of... the establishment of the welfare state'. Monitoring this, 'The particular focus upon social class differences served to establish social class as the major, almost the only, dependent variable in sociological research for the next forty years.'

This 'particular focus' was lost when, as Ball (2006, p. 56) notes, 'In the 1980s, things became more complicated as class analysis was displaced as the primary variable and race, gender and, later, disability and sexual orientation came to the fore.'. Meanwhile, the well known consequences of educational sociology's focus on class *Origins and Destinations*, as officially defined by the Office of Population Censuses and Statistics (OPCS), produced a short-hand deficit definition of 'working class' as academically unqualified and 'middle class' as academically qualified. Even today, numbers on free school meals function as a proxy for "working or under" class, as distinct from "middle". The "upper" (or ruling) class thus remains out of the picture, since the sociology of education was only concerned with the state school system. In any case, what Ken Roberts (2001) calls the smallest, best organised and most class-conscious class only ever figured problematically in the OPCS categories – even as revised in 1997.

Contemporaneously, sociology took its postmodern turn and dissolved into the pitiful collection of competing discourses and disconnected modules that it presents today without any agreed notion of itself, its subject (society), or any collective canon beyond the obligatory recognition and simultaneous rejection of the Pantheon of Founding Fathers. It is not alone in this loss of purpose which afflicts all of the humanities in further and higher study from A-level on. The dreaded "binaries" of "simplistic" Marxist class analysis were dissolved and the common sense "upper, middle, working" pyramid was largely accepted by default, while quantitative surveys – increasingly concentrated in research departments favoured by government patronage – use the OPCS measures of what Ball (2003) derided as "tick-box sociology". Ongoing class re-composition however continues to "fracture", as Roberts put it, the traditional manually working class, an unskilled section of which has been relegated to so-called "underclass" status. This leaves an Americanised class pyramid in which a new "middle-working" (or "working-middle") class is sandwiched by the same old "upper" class (somewhat internationalised) above and "under" beneath. These popular perceptions have been theorised by Savage (2000) as an expansion of the traditional middle class (as the OPCS categories reflecting the decline of heavy industry and the growth of services would seem to indicate) into "the new universal class". Paradoxically, therefore, the "return of class" in Education Studies, where much of the Sociology of Education now finds itself, has taken the form of talk about the middle class rather than the old mole of the working class.

Nor is Education Studies what has become teacher training (above) with its 4/98 standards now reduced to fewer and fluffier specifications to cover the whole “children’s workforce” but still outcomes-driven with quality assurance by OfSTED (see Ainley, Hudson and Stiasny, 2001), joined now by its further education equivalent. Teacher training is the prime example of contemporary change in the relations between further and higher education. Beginning in specialist trade colleges like Avery Hill, which is now one of the sites of the University of Greenwich, teacher training was incorporated in the new Schools of Education established in, first, the polytechnics and, then, the universities from the mid-1960s on. Their courses of post-graduate certification fulfilled the teacher unions’ long-standing demand for a graduate-entry profession. Later, under attack for their academic ‘irrelevance’ by Sir Keith Joseph, they were forced to accept a competence-based training dictated by the TTA – now the Training and Development Agency (TDA) for Schools. In effect, this reduced this postgraduate certification to further education delivered within or by HEIs. Just as successful teaching became defined as being able to meet a series of ‘standards’, teacher training has been reduced to acquiring a series of competencies.

Doctors may soon receive the same treatment, not just through the new contract for GPs, subjected to popularity rating by their patients and dragooned into privatised polyclinics, but with the 2006 Department of Health *Good Doctors, Safer Patients* proposals to abolish the role of the General Medical Council, for setting the content of the undergraduate medical curriculum, in favour of yet another government agency.

### **What Education Studies could become**

An area of practice or expertise to which a body of knowledge (and possibly skill) can be applied. In this respect, Education Studies is like Youth and Community Studies (Y&CS), but with the important difference that Y&CS is professionally validated so that, even though there is a list of competences to be acquired by Y&CS students on their placements, this practice is combined – polytechnic style – with theory in what is still (just about) “higher education” and not relegated to teacher training or “FE in HE” (‘Higher education. but not as we know it, Jim’ as one further education manager put it in Ainley 2003). In this respect, teacher training mirrors the growth of competence-based training programmes of FE in HE, such as the two-year Foundation “degrees”, and, outwith “HE”, in the preparations for them that will allegedly be afforded by the (also competence-based) McDiplomas (see Allen and Ainley, 2008). So, one thing that Education Studies could do is reclaim teacher training. This might do more for what OfSTED regards as our “world-class” teaching workforce than the compulsory MA originally proposed to be delivered by Ernst and Young. So, Education Studies could reclaim that as well! Education Studies could thus provide a practical answer to Brian Simon’s 1981 question, *Why No Pedagogy in England?*

Education Studies should be much more ambitious than this though! In *A Learning Age* when all aim at “Lifelong” if not “Lifewide” *Learning in A Learning Society*, along with other titles and slogans that have already become jaded, Education Studies should aim to place, as Ranson argued (1993, p. 177 and 193-4),

*‘a theoretically informed education discipline at the centre of the social sciences... to develop a new paradigm for education that moves the field from its perceived position at the periphery to the centre of analysis and purpose within the social sciences as much as within the study of society... Education could in this way aspire to be the centre of a new paradigm of theoretical analysis within and for the social sciences.’*

As has been suggested, the one thing that other disciplines, arts and crafts – whether in the sciences, humanities or applied technologies – share with each other and Education Studies is that their students are supposedly learning. An “alternative paradigm of inquiry-based learning” (Ainley, 2004) developed in Education Studies, instead of separating teaching from research as is now proposed, would encourage investigation, experiment and debate by all students and as many other people as possible. The critical space (above) within education institutions to allow imagination free reign to develop, from experience, the new ideas necessary to comprehend and handle rapidly changing reality must be preserved and extended by making research and creation an integral part of the independent study of all students, at all levels of learning. Schools, colleges and universities are necessary complements to the wider democratic transformation that is now demanded for human survival.

As far as we know, the human species is unique in having a symbolic language enabling self-reflective consciousness. Because of this, humanity can learn from the record of collective experience chronicled in history and preserved in art, craft and culture as well as scientific method and technology. In this sense, man is the learning animal, as William Morris said, and this is what Marx called our “species being”. Education Studies should teach its students, and those who share its necessary concern with the future, to appreciate why and how this is the case – the fortuitous concatenation of upright gait with opposable thumbs, unusual sexuality, prolonged childhood, cookery, symbolic language and (other) tool-use, distancing the objects of our focal awareness, etc, etc. What tragedy if this unique species cannot learn fast enough to avoid its own self-caused and foreseen extinction!

This is a challenge to the very purpose of education or cultural learning – the handing down to future generations of ‘the whole expanding corpus of human knowledge’ that, as Sir Geoffrey Vickers says (1965, p. 108), ‘must be re-learned about three times in each century’. If there is no future, there is no point in this institutionalised learning. Such a possibility may seem apocalyptic and therefore demented and yet, as the government’s own 2007 *Stern Review* shows, such predictions can no longer be regarded as delusional. Put simply,

*‘The earth was very hot four billion years ago. The atmosphere was unbreathable. Methane, carbon dioxide, hydrogen sulphide. Nature hadn’t learnt to break down cellulose. When a tree fell, it lay on the ground and got buried by the next tree that fell. This was the Carboniferous. The earth was a lush riot. And in the course of millions and millions of years of trees falling on trees, almost all the carbon got taken from the air and buried underground. And there it stayed until yesterday, geologically speaking. What happens to a log that falls today is that fungus and microbes digest it, and all the carbon goes back into the sky. There can never be another Carboniferous. Ever. Because you can’t ask Nature to unlearn how to biodegrade cellulose. Mammals came along when the world cooled off. Frost on the pumpkin. Furry things in dens. But now we have a very clever mammal that’s taking all the carbon from underground and putting it back into the atmosphere. Once we burn up all the coal and oil and gas, we’ll have an antique atmosphere. A hot nasty atmosphere that no one’s seen for three hundred million years. Once we’ve let the carbon genie out of its lithic bottle.’ (Franzen, 2002, p. 375-6).*

With ‘the suicide programme still uninterrupted and well under way’ (Nuttall 1968, p. 56), survival has become our new Utopia. Our shifting perspectives on the past enable us to see that our present parlous situation is not without precedent. Indeed, as Bateson wrote (1973, p. 470), ‘It appears that the man-environment system has certainly been progressively



unstable since the introduction of metals, the wheel and script.’ We can also learn from chiliastic enthusiasms of the past, such as those that seized upon some South Sea islands on first contact with Europeans, or that which gripped England in the early nineteenth century with the promise of “free trade” (Polanyi, 1957). Indeed, the recent free-market millenarianism was bolstered by the ubiquity of “learning” and the promise of a “learning revolution” supported by new ICT such as the internet.

Education Studies can distinguish between such naive views of ‘learning’ as self-evidently good to indicate that what is learnt may be irrelevant, false or morally wrong. A social theory of learning can also discriminate between information and competence at the level of standards-based training and the corresponding terms knowledge and skill at the educational level. This will clarify “How much knowledge has been lost in information” (Eliot, 1934). What is already clear to any serious Education Study is that, in important respects, society is not learning at all but the opposite. It is becoming progressively more stupid! It is not just that teaching to tests may not, after all, have improved literacy and numeracy when student standards of spelling and maths are slipping (Alexander 2008) but, more importantly, corporately controlled and state manipulated mass media daily plumb new depths of banality and sensation.

“Dumbing down” may be politically incorrect, but it is not coincidental that the term appeared simultaneously with the extension of education to later and later years in what has been called *The Learning Unto Death* (Rikowski, 1999). Also, as has been suggested above, in relation to the type case of teacher training, to a proletarianisation of the professions disguised by widening access to HE presented as a professionalisation of the proletariat (see Ainley, 2008). This is part of a redefinition of *Class and Skill in New divisions of labour and knowledge* in what has become the new market-state in which state-subsidised private capital more directly dominates citizens turned into consumers (Ainley, 1993). In a daily more divided society, official “learning” substitutes for the guarantee of regular wages to integrate many employees into a changing economy, while relegating whole groups of people to unemployment and many more to insecurity in employment. Awareness of these developments has been reduced in an on-going process in which schooling (Aronowitz, 2008) has played a large part. Dedicated obsessively to the vocational ‘needs’ of employers, education – whether in school, college or university – no longer aspires to emancipate the minds of future generations. Rather, it increasingly forecloses their possibilities. In this sense, *Education Make You Fick, Innit?* (Ainley and Allen, 2007). Instead, Education Studies should make you think!

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