

## TEACHER EDUCATION AS DISCOURSE

David G. Smith defines “discourse” as “the way meaning is achieved amongst actors by a mutual agreement, direct or tacit, about key terms and actions, adding that: “Teacher education is a form discourse in this sense, namely it has, over time, developed its own in-house language and set of procedures which define it within which the various stakeholders feel at home.”<sup>1</sup> After phenomenology’s apparent eclipse by poststructuralism, “discourse” became widely used in North American curriculum studies.<sup>2</sup> “Naming teacher education as a form of discourse,” Smith suggests, “opens the way for an examination of it as a language activity, or set of language practices.”<sup>3</sup> Smith examines the way discourse functions in teacher education, an examination originating in an assumption “that it is possible to name completely what is happening in any situation,” an assumption in service to “smoothness in teacher education,” something Smith thinks we should problematize because it represents an “over-determination for certain things to happen in a certain way ... [and that constitutes] violence against children as well as against our students and ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> Departing from a poststructuralist understanding of language as embedded in and sometimes even constitutive of social reality, Smith suggests that, in teacher education at least: “Words are taken to *represent* the real world, and the real world is invoked by our very speaking about it.”<sup>5</sup> One is reminded of the phenomenological distinction between the “pre-conceptual” and the “conceptual,” a distinction poststructuralism contested, blurred, then superseded.<sup>6</sup> But maybe it’s positivism that troubles Smith as “[t]he problem of trying to establish definitively the nature of the Real—the real teacher, the real teacher associate, the real student teacher—the very desire for such establishment may itself be the problem.”<sup>7</sup> His point resonates with Foucault’s focus on hegemonic elements of “discourse,” but sidesteps the matter of his own sense of what is “real,” namely “postmodern consciousness ... no longer by a linear textual imagination of authors and books, or by a shared sense of community, but rather by flashing icons and storylines that last no longer than an hour.”<sup>8</sup>

Bruce Moghtader -the research assistant who summarized the Smith article - inserted here: “I think Smith could not have foreseen advertisements in their 50-second depiction of solving ‘real world’ problems [that would] one day triumph - thanks to YouTube and Facebook,” adding that what had been “remote has [now] been internalized and personalized.” True: Smith is writing during a period of enthusiasm, if not ebullience, over what technology – the internet specifically – could offer humanity, evident when he concludes: “The postmodern movement holds great promise for a surge of creative activity by affording new kinds of co-incidence between human beings.”<sup>9</sup> That “promise” seems now broken, in part because life online has meant for many what Smith cautioned against, namely that: “One’s personal or collective past can never be cocooned, therefore, into sentimentalized history or nostalgia, but must

constantly be faced,”<sup>10</sup> requiring a non-coincidence with what is, separation from what we’re immersed in, a pause: “The ability to attend to ourselves, to our students, to our collective lives depends first and foremost on a form of stopping, and the creation of a space in which we can truly listen and hear ourselves.”<sup>11</sup> No full-stop, however, as: “Genuine growth in self-understanding is the consequence of an ongoing four-fold action: an opening to others, an engagement with others, followed by a form of self-reflection implying self-modification, followed in turn by re-engagement.”<sup>12</sup>

Smith and I share a sense of the significance of “self-work” – *currere* as a concept and method offers one form of such subjective labor<sup>13</sup> – but for him it’s supplementary - an “also” - rather than the main event: “Also, it seems to me there is a point to how a teacher must, in the most profound sense of the terms, take up his or her identity as a form of ethical responsible *self-work*, working to *be* that which can reflect the light of others.”<sup>14</sup> For me presence is primary,<sup>15</sup> but not necessarily in order to “reflect the light of others” – that one is reflecting the light of others past and present is a given – and certainly not *all* others, as there are many whose “light” must be refracted not reflected, shielding students from those whose “self-work” seems simply self-aggrandizing, for example. Intriguing that Smith seems to associate “assuming full responsibility for oneself in the presence of others,” with “a willingness to take up the hard work of attending to the tain of one’s own mirror,”<sup>16</sup> the term “tain” an ancient one<sup>17</sup> referencing the tin foil once at the back of mirrors.<sup>18</sup> Wise to know what holds oneself together and how that might inform one’s interactions with others, but from Freud on we’ve been acutely aware that we can’t know that completely, can’t in principle take “full responsibility” for even ourselves – to some degree we are constructed by others - although certainly one is obligated to take into account “where one’s coming from.”<sup>19</sup>

In his commentary, Moghtader quotes Smith criticizing the “general homogeneity of the discourse of teacher education,”<sup>20</sup> paraphrasing Smith when he notes that “the terms by which we educate our teachers constitute the form of mentality and practice by which certain lexicons socialize our teachers into being a certain kind of teacher,” surely on definition of “discourse,” the term with which Smith started the essay. Moghtader then quotes an example that Smith provides - “helping students to become productive members of society,” the meaning of which is exactly what educators should open to question.<sup>21</sup> Questioning – by implication challenging - hegemonic discourse becomes central to a revised discourse of teacher education. Recourse to phenomenology or even a biological argument<sup>22</sup> would seem needed here to escape being embedded in another discourse, itself open to question and challenge. That conundrum even the inestimably significant scholarship of David G. Smith cannot readily resolve.

## REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> 1999, 89. That is less the case in the United States, where teacher education has been debated, both within the field and outside it. Few “feel at home.”
- <sup>2</sup> See chapters eight and nine in Pinar et al. 1995, a text in which sectors of scholarship are characterized as “discourses.”
- <sup>3</sup> 1999, 91. Certainly it is that, but – at least according to Foucault – so much more: <https://philosophy.stackexchange.com/questions/10700/what-does-foucault-mean-by-discursive-practices-or-discursive-constitutions-in-d>
- <sup>4</sup> 1999, 91.
- <sup>5</sup> 1999, 92.
- <sup>6</sup> For examples and summaries of phenomenology and post-structuralism in curriculum studies, see Pinar and Reynolds 1992, and Pinar et al. 1995.
- <sup>7</sup> 1999, 93. The notion of “the real” is infamously in play in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory - <https://www.encyclopedia.com/psychology/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/real-lacan#:~:text=The%20real%2C%20a%20category%20established%20by%20Jacques%20Lacan%2C,as%20%22that%20which%20never%20ceases%20to%20write%20itself.%22> – but its meaning there is almost opposite what Smith intends.
- <sup>8</sup> 1999, 94.
- <sup>9</sup> 1999, 95.
- <sup>10</sup> 1999, 97.
- <sup>11</sup> 1999, 98.
- <sup>12</sup> 1999, 99.
- <sup>13</sup> Pinar 2023.
- <sup>14</sup> 1999, 100-101.
- <sup>15</sup> Pinar 2023.

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<sup>16</sup> 1999, 101.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.wordreference.com/definition/-tain-> -tain-, root: “-tain- comes from French and ultimately from Latin, where it has the meaning "hold." It is related to the root -ten-. This meaning is found in such words as: abstain, attain, contain, detain, entertain, maintain, obtain, pertain, rein, retain, retinue, sustain.”

<sup>18</sup> tain (n.) "**thin tin plate** for mirrors, etc.," 1858, from French tain "tin foil" (17c.), an alteration of étain "tin," from Latin stagnum, stannum "alloy of silver and lead," in Late Latin "tin" (see stannic). Entries linking to tain stannic (adj.)

<sup>19</sup> Simpson 2002.

<sup>20</sup> 1999, 89.

<sup>21</sup> 1999, 90.

<sup>22</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-biology/>