

A reflection on doctoral supervision as the co-production of differential space

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In this chapter I reflect on how undertaking doctoral study under Helen's supervision two decades ago influenced my growth as an educator in powerful and long-lasting ways. As with all doctoral study, the experience was developmental: it challenged and changed me and opened up new pathways of possibility. It was also anchored in a particular moment in the history of education in England, the establishment of marketisation across the education landscape and the gradual, adaptive neoliberalisation of education policy in schools, colleges and higher education – the critique of which has been at the centre of Helen's oeuvre. This chapter focuses on a historical reading of this period before moving on to reflect on the nature of the supervisory relationship. My doctorate studied the impact of marketisation on further education in England. The connecting of human experience to theory and research literature gave me a critical understanding that enabled me to sustain the social justice values that had informed my professional identity as an educator. But also, Helen's supervision modelled a personalised dialogical model of knowledge production to contrast with the debased knowledge production practices associated with forms of accountability in the emerging marketised conditions. My experience as a doctoral student has subsequently informed my own supervisory practice.

Key words: Differential Space, Lefebvre, Doctoral supervision, history.

History, biography & supervision

I began my career in education teaching English in a comprehensive secondary school in Birmingham in 1988. In the same year, the Education Reform Act introduced the National Curriculum and through the local management of schools, introduced a new apparatus of accountability. It also increased the powers of the Secretary of State for Education (Gilbert 2012, 6). In addition, the Act heralded the beginning of the erosion of local authority powers – a trend that has continued to the present day. This legislation was followed by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (National Archives 1992) which incorporated further education colleges, allowed polytechnics university status and established marketisation at the heart of post-school education policy. 1992 was also the year that I began teaching in a further education college in Birmingham which, by 1998 had been embroiled in a debilitating (for me and many other staff) industrial relations situation for five years. Countless branch meetings, ballots, days of strike action, deductions of pay, votes of

no confidence in the principal, contract negotiations with an insincere and bullying Vice Principal, 'restructurings' and three rounds of redundancy made a mockery of any sense that my 'career' as a teacher was going in a meaningful direction (see Smith 2015) – or so I thought. It was a tough time personally. What I was living through felt to me to be so extraordinary and difficult to understand that it became the focus of my doctorate. I hadn't gone into further education as an active trade unionist, but once there, I had no choice but to become one. As I became increasingly active within the branch of the teachers' trade union (now part of the University and Colleges Union (UCU)), I realised that I too was likely to become a target of management. With our first child on the way, I had to contemplate possible redundancy. My professional experience in education had reached its lowest ebb. However, in retrospect, this context was the smithy in which my soul as an educationalist was forged.

Helen's was a significant supportive presence in that smithy. Between 1998 and 2004, Helen was my PhD supervisor. An amalgam of intellectual endeavour, indomitable purpose all founded on a set of values that I identified with created the conditions in which I completed my doctoral study. During that period, locked in a struggle with an intransigent college leadership who had opted for a war of attrition over a negotiated contract settlement, the purpose of the teaching and learning I was involved in was eclipsed. Thankfully, the move to a different college to manage Access to Higher Education provision rekindled my love for teaching: positioned somehow away from the firing line while still being engaged in the struggle. As I reflect on it now: further education almost killed me, but then it saved my life.

The supervisory arrangement was serendipitous: the University of Birmingham at that time didn't have a specialist in further education, as the tutor for my Masters, Glenn Rikowski, was moving on. However, as I had a school teaching background and Helen's work was looking at the emergence of New Public Management and 'Jurassic Management' in education, I was directed to her office. During our monthly supervisions I attempted to reconcile the values that provided a foundation for my understanding of the purpose of education and what I was witnessing in further education as a consequence of what we have come to identify as neoliberalisation (Davies 2014). I was teaching in a further education college and my doctorate originated in a need to understand fully the forces that were having such an appalling impact on teaching and learning and the culture of my workplace and those of other colleges in the city. At that time, those forces were incomprehensible to me. Doctoral study started a process of Freirean *conscientisation*, opening an opportunity to increase my understanding about the sometimes invisible forces that were having such an impact on my experience; it also opened a way of

understanding: incremental, but also open to uncertainty and to the overturning of assumptions and dearly held beliefs.

Those six years of study marked a stage in my career in education and a move from one kind of activism to another. This was marked by a move from further and into higher education once I had achieved my doctorate.

I completed my doctorate in the summer of 2004, at a point when the massification of Higher Education was taking hold, driven by New Labour's express commitment to building a knowledge economy in response to anxieties around globalisation, the shift of mass manufacturing to the 'developing world' and the expectation that 'service industries' would be the area of growth in the British economy (O'Donovan 2020). A huge investment in adult education was taking place. What was known as the *Skills for Life* initiative, founded on a particular neoliberal version of 'inclusion' that aimed to 'lift... some 3.5 million adults out of low literacy by 2010' (DfES 1999) – but that ignored the problems associated with endless growth, the finiteness of global resources and the myth of 'trickle down' economics – meant that more Literacy, Numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages teachers were needed and teachers to educate them. Achieving my doctorate provided me with an opportunity to move into Higher Education (HE) as a teacher educator but also with the promise of furthering my research interests in critiquing policy related to further and adult education. I had thought that entering HE would be to escape from the rampant pressures of managerialism, pseudo-business cultures and commodification. I have since learnt that the rhizomes of neoliberalisation have colonised not just every level of education but other public institutions as well: the health service, housing, the criminal justice system and even the church.

From the perspective of a quarter century later, I can see my personal and professional experience of crisis as part of this broader historical arc. I felt mired in a further education context in which leadership had taken on all the negative features of New Public Management (which Helen has critiqued so forensically (Gunter 2011, 2015, 2018). Leadership in current marketised contexts we now know tends to be overpaid, authoritarian, audit-orientated and paying lip-service to a bogus form of accountability. Today these features seem to have extended into almost every corner of our education system.

In this period teachers have seen enjoyment and joy itself leached out of educational space by the vampire of assessment. A market fundamentalism wedded to the belief that marketisation is 'the tide that lifts all boats' commands education policy (see for example Willetts 2011, Belger 2022) and informs the entire educational apparatus with an absolute meritocratic belief in assessment as an index of human ability, 'intelligence' and even moral character. Indeed, education in England is bookended

by proposals for nursery aged children of 3 and 4 to undertake ‘benchmark’ assessments on entry (Standards and Testing Agency 2022) and performance statistics for universities based on Longitudinal Education Outcomes (DfE 2016).

Over this last twenty five years it has become clear that an understanding of history is such a necessary part of the collective educational consciousness. In this case, not the history of the Tudors and Stuarts or that of the British Empire spreading its pink eczemic rash across more than a sixth of the earth’s landmass, but recent history: the history that we sense being edited, moulded and interpreted through the simulacra of media with much the same deliberate intent as the curriculum for state schools by government. That is the personal and experiential history that according to Lefebvre (2004, 47) is banished from our consciousness by the tumult and momentum of ‘the present’, a ‘fact and effect of commerce’ that infuses our experience of the everyday. Further education in particular seems to have been vulnerable to sandpit policy-making – in which bright young advisors who have only a superficial knowledge of further education (and no lived experience) get to experiment and adversely affect the lives of young people with impunity. Hence, the barrage of policy, the annual ‘churn’ of initiatives, revised assessment practices, amended funding rules, even new qualifications and an evident objectification of college students who are viewed primarily in human capital terms through the lens of ‘skills’ (see Keep 2006). In the face of this perpetual, engulfing present, those of us committed to making sense of education policy and the values and forces that underpin it, need a firm grip on recent history.

John Berger in his novel, *G*, writes about history like this:

All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparatively recent past, but in the strict sense: the consciousness of one’s own activity as one actually performs it. History is thus the self-knowledge of the living mind. For even when the events which the historian studies are events that happened in the distant past, the condition of their being historically known is that they should vibrate in the historian’s mind. (Berger 2012, 54)

All this suggests that we can’t step outside of history: history is both something we are caught up in while also it is of us and authored by us. With this in mind we might wonder then at these last thirty years or so of education history, a period in which Helen has been so busy researching and critiquing the havoc wrought by neoliberal precepts on educational endeavour, on educational leadership and on the purposes of education. The determination, instilled in many of us by modernity and our need to cling to the benefits of being rational beings (some of the time) and onto the belief that human progress is a steady ascent, that we are inching up an incline –

a fact that may only be apparent in hindsight – has been seriously eroded in the latter part of this period. We may no longer feel convinced that things here are always going to improve. And perhaps, in this determination we had in any case forgotten our positionality and privilege. For is it not true that there are sections of our society whose disenfranchisement has been so comprehensive that they have never felt the ‘progress’ owed by modernity and for whom the everyday has never provided a comforting cushion of financial reward, who have indeed only ever inhabited the suburbs of its promise?

For many of us, it seems the rational view of history as determining the steady accretion of human progress has taken a battering. Neoliberalisation has functioned in contradictory ways in this regard. On the one hand, the neoliberalisation of education in this country has functioned to feed a ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011, Davies and Bansel 2007) for students who are sold a dream that education is a pathway to secure employment; on the other, neoliberal reforms have proceeded in tandem with the production of contention over what constitutes legitimate knowledge in the field of education. In England, at the heart of this contention was a destructive binarism promulgated by the former Secretary of State for Education, among others: of the ‘Blob’ versus government. According to this view, the Blob is an enemy of standards, an enemy of discipline and an enemy of knowledge. Fazackerley (2022) cites David Spendlove, associate dean of Manchester University’s faculty of humanities and former head of initial teacher education, as saying: “As education secretary, Michael Gove talked about fighting ‘the Blob’ [the education establishment]. He and Nick Gibb [Minister of State for School Standards 2015-21] had this idea that universities and teacher education departments were all Marxists. Their influence hasn’t gone away.” This, in the context of a ‘market review’ of initial teacher education in England, suggests that across a thirty five year cycle we have moved from a government concern to standardise what is learnt by children in (state) school to the imperative of standardising what student-teachers are taught in universities.

My doctoral study produced a thesis – but that doesn’t mean that my interpretations and understandings of policy in further and adult education have remained static. Learning has continued. My interpretation of the impact of policy on further education has refined and matured over two decades to the extent that looking at my starting point now, it seems to me hopelessly naïve. The trajectory of my perspective looks like this:

- i) That further education was made a special case by the F&HE Act, experimented on and interfered with in a way that could only originate in its status of neglect.

- ii) That marketisation was premised on reversing this neglect but somehow ended up intensifying it
- iii) Marketisation: intended to 'raise standards' but had unacknowledged appalling side effects
- iv) A realisation that policy makers were not oblivious to these effects and were indifferent about whether they continued
- v) A further realisation that they accepted the practices of fabrication, of the self-interested presentation of positively inflected performance data as 'natural' that they modelled them, that this was the expected behavioural norm in a marketised setting
- vi) That truth, integrity and indeed the teachers' 'soul' were indeed casualties in this.
- vii) That further education's status of neglect was a deliberate meritocratic strategy that classed 'unacademic' young people, objectifying them in an instrumentalist skills discourse. As such, they were undeserving of properly resourced provision as neoliberal education policy doesn't just think inequality is 'natural' but that it is a necessary and (even) desirable as it catalyses competition.

This arc then, has not yet finished its sweep. The culture war is entrenched and seems to have established battle-lines across the educational landscape. The signs: the erosion of integrity, the subordination of truth, were there from the outset. Doctoral study with Helen provided me with a shelter from the technical rationality of a punishing and hostile educational environment during which the seeds of this understanding were planted, germinated and the young shoots of thought nurtured (see below for the significance of this word).

Supervision as the co-production of differential pedagogical space

Knowledge production – focused as it inevitably is in market-orientated environments on so called 'performance' – has never been so busy. Data – raw, 'managed' and interpreted data – is everywhere. And yet to what end? Now more clearly than ever, in education much of this activity can be seen to ignore teaching and learning as a social practice imbued with values and mores and instead to be feeding into a set of competitive relations. Growth, personal development, social justice – all of these goals are displaced and/or undermined by those of competition, productivity and efficiency.

In environments colonised by performativity, our problem is that words, beliefs and even values are at risk of ringing hollow, of being emptied of meaning by insincere over-use. Language is insidious in the way in which it shapes our meaning-making,

our thought and our practice. The Foucauldian view (e.g. Foucault 1980) that discourse has dominating, normalizing effects that operate at the level of embodied human experience suggests further that in an era in which our educational institutions have become dominated by New Public Management, managerialist discourse has colonised teachers' practice and indeed teachers as subjects. The supervisory space is not immune from these pressures. At the level of the institution there are normative timeframes, prescriptive writing conventions, the technology of doctoral regulations; from publishers, there are further stipulations, eight page contracts to be signed, timeframes and turnaround times that can make an academic feel like a 'content provider'; from the supervisor, there may be a favoured set of theoretical tools, preferred perspectives on context, a predilection for a particular methodology. While individual and personal time-scales are more likely to be taken account of in doctoral study, there are still pressures to deliver 'completions'; an insidious drive for efficiency might in addition engender all kinds of unconscious narrowing impulses. An emancipatory supervisory practice requires a conscious resistance of such pressures. One aspect of that is preserved through language awareness. This was amongst the lessons about supervisory practice that I learnt from Helen. There are a couple of words that I have carried forward into my own pedagogic vocabulary that testify to this.

The first word is *cherish*.

The second word is *nurture*.

These are value-laden words that provide an insight into Helen's practice (and into Helen herself) not only in the supervisory space but profoundly in her conceptualisation of what doctoral study (and education more broadly) is supposed to be. There is a temporality to both words. Both words speak of a consistency of affect, a disposition of care; both are indicative of commitment beyond the present, a commitment that overarches the linear time-scales of productivity, consumption and waste that predominate in post-industrial western societies under capitalism. These are words that emanate from differential pedagogical space.

Lefebvre's thought (Lefebvre 1991) on spatiality blurs the distinction between mental space and physical space. Central to his Marxist humanist reading of spatiality, is the idea that capital produces, shapes and devours space in particular ways: the way space is conceived of, its symbolic and representative meanings as well as its qualities as lived-in space. In Lefebvrian terms, successful supervision involves the co-production of a 'differential' educational space that allows for engagement with existing knowledge, criticality in relation to that and, ultimately, the production of new and original knowledge through the students' research. In the urban spaces of late twentieth century capitalism, Lefebvre saw capitalist relations as producing

‘abstract space’ that tended towards homogenisation and was shaped by its commodified exchange value (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 49-53). We might see resonance here with the marketisation and massification of HE and the enormous expansion of HE estate that has taken place in England in the last two decades. For Lefebvre this ‘abstract’ space is oppressive and ‘dominated’ by the operation of capital and the relations of commerce. In contrast, he defines differential space as the potential that is hidden within abstract space. It is produced by the contradictions contained and obscured by abstract space and the possibilities inherent in it. Rather than exchange value, differential space privileges use value and inclusiveness. In other words, differential space is produced when the differences that people bring with them and the meanings they share through these are foregrounded. As such, differential space acknowledges its own affective and reflexive qualities. It can be co-produced by people *within* abstract space and may be informal and transitory, arising from the inherent rigidity of abstract space that relies on implicit convention and compliance (Leary-Owhin, 2015, p. 4).

Like all educational space, supervisory space is potentially abstract space. The intimacy and intensity of supervision can be both energising and inhibiting – which means that supervisors bear a responsibility to not only establish the supervisory space as having particular affective qualities but also to foster its co-production involving the doctoral student as an active player. A key aspect of this *differentiality* lies in its orientation towards knowledge and knowledge production which is closely bound up with a pedagogy.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière (1991) articulates a pedagogy in which the teacher is positioned as facilitator whose role is to provide the tools for learning, to point the way but never to act as a repository of the *knowledge to be learnt*. This is in sharp contrast to the kind of teacher-centred didacticism that in England currently seeks to strengthen the connection between knowledge and authority and that operates on students in educational spaces to make them biddable at best and passive at worst. The teacher in this model acts like a cartographer whose role is to equip the student with the tools necessary to make their own maps and chart their own path across different fields of knowledge. For Rancière, then, a prescribed curriculum is necessarily alienating and stultifying. Underpinning his emancipatory pedagogy instead there is an assumption of equality:

Reason begins when discourses organized with the goal of being right cease, begins where equality is recognized: not an equality decreed by law or force, not a passively received equality, but an equality in act, verified, at each step by those ... who, in their constant attention to themselves and in their endless revolving

around the truth, find the right sentences to make themselves understood by others. (Rancière, 1991: 72)

Rancière's take on reason is an important one within competitive marketised cultures in which an insistence on 'being right', regardless of the impact on the public good, has sovereignty. It also draws attention to the critical failings of our current adversarial and binary model of 'democracy'. The assumption of equality between interlocutors: not equality of understanding but on *the potential* for understanding goes against the grain of meritocratic practices and dispositions that, in embodied interactions, communicate judgemental assessments of ability and potential. There is a reminder in this of what the classroom can be as a space for collective human experience: how it can and should function as a spatial model for the co-production of democratic practice. While this picture feels as though it's a million miles away from the current *doxa*, it is worth remembering that there is a historical strand of thinking related to this (for example in Stenhouse's 1975 work on student-governed curricula).

We might conclude that supervision offers an example of the importance of conceiving of knowledge production as a social practice: *how* knowledge is shared, exchanged, encountered, co-produced has a more lasting impact and a longer term effect than *what* the knowledge is. The knowledge might be almost anything – from how to write a good literature review to how to analyse and apply theory – but how that knowledge comes to be produced and shared is crucial. This flies in the face of the conceptualisation of knowledge that underpins recent policy rhetoric about schools and schooling that champions the transmission of a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum (Gibb 2021). Gradgrindery, a most basic Victorian way of thinking about teaching as the transmission of facts – as satirised by Charles Dickens almost two centuries ago (Dickens 1981, 40-45) – seems to be back in the ascendant.

Supervisory space, when it works well, depends on the doctoral researcher taking charge of the project, finding themselves in it and experiencing the complexity of knowledge production. A supervisory experience is likely to be formative, particularly for someone who then goes on to supervise doctoral students themselves. My experience of being supervised by Helen was no exception.

Helen spoke about doctoral study as work undertaken to enter a community of educational researchers. In Bourdieusian terms, it involved locating yourself within a field – a terrain populated by other people who teach, research and think about education. This was not about belonging – although it did have elements of Lave and Wenger's 'community of practice' idea underpinning it (Lave and Wenger 1991); it was more about orientation – in the sense Ahmed uses the word (Ahmed 2006): 'finding your way'. How could you be who you were, and understand the

phenomena you wanted to research in relation to existing positions, dispositions and thought?

Other strong principles underpinning educational research were also made explicit. Accountability and integrity were qualities of the work that emerged in the course of the study. This wasn't the hollow, performed accountability of audit. Instead, it was layered, involving a dynamic between *taking account* and *giving an account*. To take account of our experiences as educators, looking critically at the forces that shape our perspectives is about acknowledging one's positionality, and in that, the fallibility of one's perspective. To use a Habermasian phrase, it infuses the research with a 'background consciousness of the relativity of one's standpoint' (Habermas 1996). Rather than being a rhetorical exercise in persuasion geared to winning an argument at the expense of the public good, the purpose of giving an account is about offering insights and interpretations that one recognises may be flawed, may be partial, but, given the data shared, are understandable and justifiable.

Embedded in the researcher's accountability was the notion of integrity. To provide an example: this emerged forcefully when Helen and I discussed the analytical process as I began writing my findings chapter. My research design included a participatory element: having interviewed six participants, I wrote a pen portrait of about 250 words of the career of each as I understood it from their interview (we called them vignettes). I then gave these to the participant to check over and that text then formed the basis for a follow up discussion. In that discussion, one idea was that I would present some initial analysis and ask them for further comment. This was a bit more than 'participant validation', it was an attempt to involve participants in meaning-making, a tentative foray into the democratisation of analysis. But, as Helen pointed out, there was a cut-off point: the point at which the discussions were written into the thesis. This was the moment when I, as the researcher, had to take responsibility for any final interpretation. This then is accountability of a different order: a personal investment in the integrity and fallibility of the interpretation and the meaning of the data as presented.

Concluding thoughts

As much as this piece of writing has been about doctoral supervision, knowledge and the practice of teaching and learning, it has also been about Helen: how she facilitated my learning and what I learnt from her. Humility and generosity are two further ingredients of disposition that characterise Helen the doctoral teacher and Helen the 'university academic'. Helen's commitment to the importance of practitioners' voices stands out in her role as editor of the *Journal of Educational Administration and History*. Helen and Tanya Fitzgerald oversaw the revitalisation of

the journal which combined rigorous application of theory and policy scholarship with this focus on close to practice perspectives. And in this, Helen never lost her optimism, her belief in the ‘natality’ of the present – that Arendtian conviction that the present moment is a seed that can catalyse action and bring forth change.

This chapter has explored how my contact with Helen as a doctoral student enabled me to steer a course by which I was able to preserve the values that propelled me into education in the first place, despite an increasingly alienating environment. At the beginning of my journey as a further-into-higher education teacher, academic and researcher, Helen’s influence marked out for me the relationship between the public sphere and the politics of my positionality as a researcher. But at a distance of more than two decades I can also see an interconnectedness between the approaches to knowledge production that I learnt about through Helen and pedagogy: an overlap between the praxis of research and that of teaching. This is something that I have reflected on and theorised in my teaching and research since.

Dedicated as we are, embattled, angry, ‘resilient’ as we are, we may have to come to terms with the understanding that the timescale we are caught up in has decades more to run. Will it take another half century to burn itself out? The concern then is that new teachers, ‘post performative’ teachers (Perryman 2022) who have never known anything different, will think that this is the way education always was and always will be. Our work as HE academics and researchers may be dismissed by policy makers and displaced by the lukewarm findings of randomised control trials whose effect sizes (given optimum conditions) demonstrate what teaching strategies work best. The knowledge produced by a generation of educational practitioners and researchers may then be discovered years hence, (demonstrating - in case we hadn’t got it yet - that our in-built occidento-centric sense of the trajectory of modernity has been forever bent out of shape: not linear, not ever upwards, but rocking back and forth salsa-like), to be dusted off like Meroitic hieroglyphics, difficult to decipher, exotic and obscure.

Surely this has been one of the central learning points of this last quarter century: that knowledge is a battleground – it shapes our societies as much as it shapes our embodied experience and as such it is as subject to the monstrous destruction, deformation and waste as every other aspect of human life under the sway of capital. This has been a central concern of all my teaching since my doctorate.

And yet, despite the ‘eyes on me’ bludgeoning *doxa* of educational policy and the excruciating refinement of structures of funding, governance and accountability – all of which work towards cultural transformation and the achievement of an (illusory) pure form of marketised education (whatever that might be), we are reassured that totalisation is not possible. It is in the informal spaces, the moments of recognition

and acknowledgement, the 'irreducibly social' (Brookfield 1997, 19) moments of reflection with colleagues that we reassert the potential of education to free us to be more human, to reimagine what democracy could be and to recast education as a force for social justice and equity unbounded by 'nation'.

Walter Benjamin, a philosopher of the Frankfurt School who killed himself to avoid falling into Nazi hands in 1940, talks about materialist historiography: the moment when observing the material world, the historical forces that have shaped it suddenly explode into view. Benjamin rejects the causal view of historicism that sees event like beads on a string. Instead, his materialist historiography insists that the past resides within the present and how who we are and how the world we are in came to be, can explode into meaning through an encounter with an ordinary object in our surroundings. Not only that, echoing Arendt's concept of natality (Arendt 1958) and the Lefebvrian notion of 'moments' (Lefebvre 2014, 634-52), Benjamin sees within the present moment the seeds of possible change, the potential for reversal, recalibration and revolution:

The 'time of the now' is shot through with chips of Messianic time' (Benjamin 2007, 263)

This is what makes the work of educators like Helen so important.

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Biography

Dr Rob Smith is a Professor of Education at Birmingham City University. Over fifteen years his body of work has explored the impact of marketised systems on education. He has researched and written extensively about policy in collaboration with practitioners from

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