

Education in the Pacific: The colours of research

Address presented by Colin Gibbs at the New Zealand Association for Research in Education Annual Conference, 4-7 December 2007, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

It may seem surprising, but when I contemplated the conference theme—*Education in the Pacific*—I thought immediately of John Drawbridge. John was a teacher, teacher educator and artist. He researched with paint and ink, canvas and paper, and he taught others to do the same.

Along with Gordon Tovey, he was one of the many inspirational people who worked at implementing Clarence Beeby's art curriculum in New Zealand schools.

Beeby, of course, drew together that wonderful team of inspirational artists and teachers to work in our schools—Cliff Whiting, Ralph Hotere, Para Matchett, John Bevan Ford, Marilyn Webb, Stanley Palmer, Grant Tilly, Selwyn Muru, and Katarina Mataira.

I thought of John Drawbridge's paintings and prints because of the intense colours. His *Pacific* series explores the intensity and subtlety of light, and the freshness and richness of colour in all its many hues. For me, John's experiments with colour and light make powerful artistic statements about the Pacific.

John's work also exemplifies practice based research—that kind of research advocated by people such as Stephen Scrivener in the UK who celebrates art production as a legitimate form of doctoral work.

It is the practice based research exemplified by New Zealanders such as Welby Ings who explores new forms of film-making production research, King Tong Ho and his ink jet work on traditional Chinese substrates which reveals new forms of aesthetics through approaching classical poetry from the Daoist position, and Lisa Williams in her journey into essay documentary film making.

We haven't quite achieved this same degree of practice based research in education yet—we seem to be still somehow captured by the shackles of traditionalism and I suppose a belief that we need to satisfy the appeal to some kind of university authority on what are proper scientific research methodologies.

But the good news is that we are beginning to see emerging researchers—a new generation—who are translating these practices and principles of practice based research into the field of education. They are the creative new generation of research pioneers in New Zealand.

Althea Lambert who is seeking to understand more about young adolescents' learning and lives as she opens the power of rhythms through breathing.

Gaylene Denford-Wood's search to reveal the Waldorf threefoldness of innerness life experiences of Steiner teachers. Jo Perry journeying through photography with refugees—some severely traumatised from their homeland experiences—as they adapt to Aotearoa-New Zealand. Roanna Horbelt's search to explain teachers' creative self-efficacy as they wrestle with their inner worlds and their outer expectations.

And each of us can name even more of these emerging research pioneers. There are exciting days ahead for research in education in Aotearoa-New Zealand—and I can't help but feel that our new generation of researchers has the potential to reflect the spirit of what it means to be research



Figure 1: John Drawbridge. Image from O'Brien (2001)



Figure 2: *Pacific Lagoon* (1962). John Drawbridge. Photographed by Michael Roth.

pioneers in *Education in the Pacific*. But it will take courage and boldness to resist the tides of political control.

You see, there is still much to research in education and especially as we venture beyond the narrow attention on outcomes, standards, and achievement. Let me think of a few possibilities:

- appreciating what the power of touch might mean in teaching and learning, for after all the soul of the teacher is released through the fingertips
- exploring what the presence and presencing of teachers may be
- understanding the rhythms of learning and the rhythms of teaching
- contemplating the spirituality of children, and of teachers for that matter, and its place in learning and teaching
- pondering what smell, light, and colour might mean in student's learning
- examining social justice through the eyes of students
- exploring the meanings and expression of love and care, compassion and empathy in learning and teaching
- finding a place for spirit and soul, and awe and wonderment—whatever these may be—in a secular curricula and pedagogy... and the list goes on.

All of which I am sure would not immediately excite policy makers and research funders. Yet the findings from such studies may well open new visions on teaching and learning.

And there is much that has been researched that needs to be researched in alternative ways. When we shed a different light on our subject, we see things in a new light. Using for instance:

- metaphor narratives
- poetry
- film making
- art works
- drama
- self-studies
- dancing
- essay documentaries
- contemplative studies
- ... and the possibilities continue.

All of which as ways of researching, I am sure, would not immediately excite policy makers and research funders. Yet the findings from such studies may well open new visions on teaching and learning. But we need the pioneers to begin the journey.

But I return to John Drawbridge and our conference theme *Education in the Pacific*. It seems to me that John's artistic experimentation also speaks as a metaphor for all research in education.

Let me briefly explain. The metaphor tells us that research is neither simply black or white. It rarely results in the pure uncontested outcomes that I guess many research funders and policy makers would like. There is always 'black and white', and that is good, but there are also shades grey, and that is good too. As researchers, we must not only learn to live with grey, but to enjoy the challenge of its equivocation—its uncertainty. I guess the head rushes for the certainty of answers, but the heart comes to understand that uncertainty is to be expected and respected. Bertrand Russell said:

Uncertainty, in the presence of vivid hopes and fears is painful, but must be endured if we wish to live without the support of comforting fairy tales... to teach [or can I insert, 'to research'] how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralysed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing. (cited in Malone, 2007, p. 47)

There is, as it were, a need for us as researchers to cultivate an appreciation of, or a disposition towards if you like, the powerful presence of uncertainty, even when our research report is complete. Malone (2007, p. 47) puts it this way: he said:

Thinking flourishes in the land between certainty and doubt.

I like that comment.

Thinking flourishes in the land between certainty and doubt”.

To me, that is the place where research dwells.

The metaphor tells me that research is sometimes Pacific blue—by this I mean not just like having the blues when things are not going right. Research is sometimes like that. But blue in terms of resonating with depth—a sense of never ending possibilities—an ocean of opportunities. Blue also has that sense of giving life, cleansing waters, baptism into newness.

Such a principle of ‘giving life’, I think, ought to be valued in our research decisions—may I encourage you to use Pacific blue when you research so that your research gives life to others.

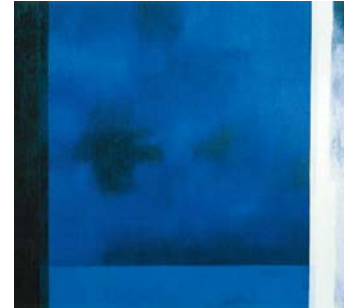


Figure 3: *Pacific* (1995). John Drawbridge. Image from O'Brien (2001).

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Figure 4: *Ki te ao mārama* (2007). Colin Gibbs. Oil on canvas. Photo by artist.

And I suggest that research is sometimes the colour Pacific red—full of emotion and passion. Yet we should not be frightened of subjectivity any more than we are accepting of objectivity. This means researching in ways that honour the fullness of humanness—the valuing of the mind, the valuing of the body, the valuing of feelings, the valuing of the spiritual, and the beingness of people. Nias (1989, p. 203) makes the point that:

no account of ... teachers' experience is complete if it does not make room for potentially dangerous emotions such as love, rage and jealousy, on the one hand, and intermittent narcissism and outbreaks of possessive dependence on the other...[Teachers'] own descriptions of their feelings about pupils, and their relationships with them and their colleagues, reminds us that the regressive, passionate and unruly aspects of human nature are always present in the classroom and may sometimes escape from rational control.

As I suggest, the colour red speaks of emotions—we cannot deny the role of emotions in our research. As Pelias (2004, p. 10) says, “beneath the head is the body; beneath the body is the heart; beneath the heart is what matters.”

To explain this a little further I would like to adapt a rather beautiful statement about educational leadership made by Bolman and Deal (1995, p. 21). Please excuse me as I take the licence to substitute the word “leader” with the word “researcher” but in doing so I do not believe that I dishonour their intent. Let me read it to you so you may dwell on it:

Perhaps we lost our way when we forgot that the heart of [researching] lies in the hearts of [researchers]. We fooled ourselves, thinking that the sheer bravado or sophisticated analytic techniques could respond to our deepest concerns. We lost touch with our most precious gift—our spirit. To recapture spirit, we need to relearn how to research with

soul... [Researching] with soul returns us to ancient spiritual basics reclaiming the enduring human capacity that gives our lives passion and purpose.

This quote reminds me of the New Zealand poet James K Baxter¹. Baxter saw the importance of character and life as central to the being of the poet. Many of his reflections returned him to a fundamental belief that in order for his poetry to mature, his character needed to be 'improved'.

To him, his engagement in the arts meant that this personal maturation and development was a life long learning and transformational process. His work and its outworking could not be separated from the person, his character, beliefs and life experiences. I wonder what, if anything, this analogy may tell us about the education researcher?

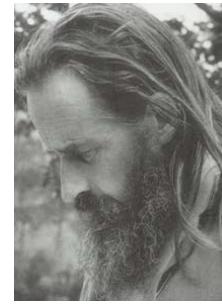


Figure 5: James K Baxter. Source unknown.

And I am reminded of the New Zealand artist Colin McCahon who saw this need for self-improvement as a person so that he might be a better artist. He commented:

I must say, I do feel pleased about the last paintings... they were good.... Now, I just can't paint. This last summer's series just wore me out. The next lot has to be better and I just don't feel capable of being better yet. I have the awful problem now of being a better person before I can paint better. (Simpson, 2001, p. 105)

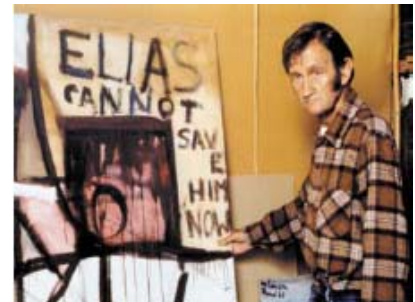


Figure 5: Colin McCahon. Source unknown.

Could there possibly not also be at least a residue of truth in these contemplations from poets and artists for education researchers committed to nurturing the fullness of students, teachers and all those involved in education? Might we find ourselves needing to say "My next research has to be better and I just don't feel capable of being better yet. I have this awful problem now of being a better person before I can research better"?

As researchers surely we cannot divorce our self—our humanness, humanity and beingness—from our research. What is my presence in my research? Like the poet and the painter, do I need to be a better person before I can research better? And what might that mean?

Pacific reds, pacific blues... and sometimes research is all of these colours, not mixed and lost but harmonising one colour with another into a wholeness. Preserving the integrity of wholeness is always a challenge for education researchers. But it remains important, for education is about life, and life is about connectedness.

Rudolf Steiner (1921/1980, p. 69) says:



Figure 6: Rudolf Steiner. Uwe Werner, Bildarchiv am Goetheanum.

we must realise at the outset that life is essentially a unity. We cannot take a piece out of it and consider that piece on its own account without doing injury to life itself.

¹ See Gibbs, C. J. (2004). *At school I have no time to dream... Spirit of the teacher and learner: Learning and teaching for spiritual development*. Paper presented at the Conference of the Teacher Education Forum of Aotearoa-New Zealand [TEFANZ], July 5-7 2004, Auckland, New Zealand

You will probably sense that I see artists as researchers. And that I also see researchers in education as artists. If researchers be like artists, then what must they be? Paul Klee (1910) said that “All the things an artist must be; [she must be] a poet, explorer of nature, a philosopher.”

Might we then also say:

All the things a researcher in education must be; [she must be] a poet, explorer of nature, a philosopher.



Figure 7: Park of idols. Paul Klee (1939)
<http://www.mcs.csu Hayward.edu/~malek/Klee9.html>

As researchers in education, such a view helps us to visualise our work as reflecting the kinds of professional artistry of which Elliot Eisner speaks. We no longer see our work that of technicians rushing to meet milestones or racing to win PBRF points. Our work then reveals the poet, the explorer of nature, and the philosopher.

And so when I think of *Education in our Pacific*, I am also thinking of researchers in education who show all that it means to have professional artistry. Researchers who demonstrate professional artistry would, according to Schön, be “unusually adept at handling situations of uncertainty, uniqueness and conflict” (1987, p. 16).

To develop such professional artistry, involves reflection, for sure. But there is, however, a prevailing misconception that in order for such reflective practice to be professional, it needs to be dispassionate while seemingly striving for some sense of objectivity. Bleakley (1999) puts it this way:

Reflection needs body, passion, sensitivity to context, and, above all, begs for style, or... in Schön’s word, ‘artistry’. Reflection-in-action is a “hands-on” business, rooted in the immediacy and heat of practice, the sticky moment of indecision, feeding on sudden shifts in circumstances—the unique and irregular—and forcing improvisation and risk. It is not a cold, detached and disembodied rationalising of that practice as a clinical dissection. (p. 319)

But researching in the spirit of professional artistry means being reflective but more than this. It is, as it were, a need for researchers to become active critical appreciators of the practice of their art in similar ways paintings and music are critiqued by art critics (Fish, 1998).

Furthermore, researching in the spirit of professional artistry engages the human capacities of flexibility, intuition and creativity. And perhaps too often flexibility, intuition, and creativity are undervalued attributes in research processes. As Bond (2000, p. 137) says, this approach “emphasises mystery rather than mastery”. And of that mystery rather than mastery, Lee Shulman makes the wonderful point that researching in education ‘begins in wonder and curiosity but ends in teaching’ (1997, p. 6).

To put this another way, researchers who demonstrate professional artistry believe that they may approach their profession as being like an art. They view their role as a democratic ‘calling’ requiring them to act in autonomy rather than being controlled, and they see the process of researching as being conducted in a spirit of ‘not knowing’ (cf Henderson, 2001a, 2001b).

I guess we can take the metaphor of artist and researcher further. We might, for instance, ask the artist and the researcher... if nature be so perfect, why do you represent it in so many different ways? Isn’t there but one way... one answer?”

And the artist and the researcher will probably respond something like... yes, but there are always new ways of expressing truths, even if those truths remain the same. Therein is our encouragement to seek new ways of researching in education that shed new light on that which is both known and unknown. For, as Pelias (2004, p. 10) says:

many scholars have come to understand that what they believed to be claims of truth were best understood as demonstrations of the inadequacy of language or as reflections of their own point of view and political interests.

Paul Klee, the artist, also said “The artist does not reproduce the visible; rather he [*sic*] makes things visible” (Chipp, 1956, p. 182).

One purpose, then, of our research endeavours must be to make things visible not just in black and white, but in an array of colours that celebrates the simple beauty of complexity. And that requires knowledge. It requires skill. But above all else, it needs wisdom. Koerner (2007) says:

Wisdom and knowledge are the keys to turning mere survival into the art of living. Knowledge, like science, is a taking part, while wisdom, [which is] a form of art, is the putting together. It synthesizes and integrates while knowledge analyses and differentiates. Wisdom sees with eyes of the mind, envisioning relation, wholeness and unity. Knowledge accepts what can be verified by the sense, grasping at the specific and the diverse. Both wisdom and knowledge are based on experience, but knowledge retains experience through the filter of conceptual thought, while wisdom speaks in images, symbols, and paradox.

Wisdom speaks in images, symbols, and paradox. So, to use Paul Klee’s idea as an analogy, research in education is not about reproducing the visible, but about making things visible, even in new ways, in new colours, and new voices—making visible through images, symbols, and paradox.

Because education is about people, our research ought to also make visible the voices that reveal new understandings and appreciations—not just the words spoken but the colours in which they are imbued.

In education research we invite the voices of people through sharing their stories, in the gifting of their responses.

Our conversations with, and through, people draw us into contact not just with them and their essence, but with their meaningful artefacts and the deep colours of their heritage. This means entering into a real presence of community in research from which we draw on a deeper appreciation of what Manning (2000) calls ‘*communitas*’—the emotional, sacred character of community formed between and among people—the spoken and unspoken voices—the heard, the unheard, and the yet to be heard.

And our contemplations become focussed in the meanings of people’s humanness. We become focussed not on being driven to find answers but rather on lingering on the questions we find emerging and re-emerging. We become focussed on the privilege of being invited to share in appreciating more of the whole person.

It is, as it were, researching in the spirit of contemplation and action playfully united (O’Reilly, 2005). True this requires patience, but not patience in the sense of passively waiting—rather, as Mayeroff says, by giving “the other room to live [we] enlarge the other’s living room, whereas the impatient person narrows it.”

Listen to Soana as we go into her living room to experience the colours of her life. Soana La'akulu Hau is an early childhood teacher of Tongan and Cook Island descent. I asked her a simple question, and I guess in my simplicity, I expected a simple answer, "How did you really become a teacher?" She said:

I began becoming a teacher at birth... in my own little world, teaching my parents that when I cried it was for a reason—I either was hungry or just needed to voice myself—and that when I was happy I giggled and smiled, and I might have needed a change or just the excitement of familiar faces surrounding me.

When I felt cold, my tiny body would shiver and my soft gentle lips changed to a purpley colour. I taught my brothers and sisters how to be gentle with my wee tiny body, that if they held me too tight I would scream, and with lots of hugs and cuddles I would rest my peaceful body in their warm arms.



Figure 8: Soana La'akulu Hau.
Photographer Memory La'akulu.

Can you hear and feel Soana's colours? Listen as she shares more...

Teaching is like our Cook Island Tivaevae patterns which take time and precise cutting. Each pattern tells a story of something valuable to the Cook Islands—the pattern could be a flower, a coconut, or a special artefact. Teachers are like the Tivaevae. The value of Tivaevae is more than its pattern—it is the colours of life represented in the environment.

Like this, teachers bring the colour to education that represents our desire to teach, our role to always find knowledge which is combined with care and love.



Figure 9: Cook Island Tivaevae

I guess as researchers we come to understand more and more as time goes by that the "heart learns that stories are the truths that won't keep still" (Pelias, 2004, p. 171).

This conference is about *Education in the Pacific*. Over the next few days we won't keep still. I am sure we will experience research in its many colours—we will hear many voices and feel the rhythms.

And we will see the researcher made visible as the poet, explorer of nature, and the philosopher weaving research with professional artistry.

So, welcome to our conference. It is now my pleasure to declare the 2007 Conference of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education officially open.

Nā rēira
Nga mihi nui ki a koutou katoa
kua huihui mai
Tena koutou
Tena koutou
Tena koutou katoa.

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Notes: Images used in this paper are for educational purposes only. Photographs of John Drawbridge are drawn from O'Brien, G. (Ed) (2001). *John Drawbridge: Wide open interiors*. Wellington City Art Gallery: Mallinson Rendell Publishers.