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# BOOK REVIEWS

**On Bourdieu, education and society**
Derek Robbins, 2006
Oxford, The Bardwell Press
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The backbone of this book is the assembly in one place of 25 examples of Robbins' excellent scholarship, reconfirming that he is one of the leading exponents of Bourdieusian thinking in the English-speaking world. Robbins is at his strongest when analysing two main topics: firstly, the origins, development and location of Bourdieu's work in relation to various strands of philosophical discourse; secondly, the problematic Anglo-Saxon reception of the ideas, and the reasons for it. The shorter Part One of the book offers an autobiographical account of Robbins' social location and educational and then professional trajectory, and also his contact and engagement with Pierre Bourdieu, both in person and in a more general, intellectual sense. Robbins' 'reflexive response' to Bourdieu allows the reader to share insights around the social conditions for Robbins' own subjectivity. In other words, there is some establishment here of the necessary relationship of *habitus* and *field*, with the author of the book himself functioning as the case in point. Whilst Robbins claims that he is attempting to write this material in a way that will 'retrieve a pre-sociological self-understanding' (p. 4) it is impossible to read it unknowingly, and it works well as a piece of honest and detailed self-socio-analysis.

I could easily devote a great deal of print to the many virtues of this book. Bryan Turner's preface lists seven good reasons that one might read this book rather than some of many others offering an exegesis of Bourdieu. Here, however, I will mention four aspects of it that I think could be of interest to educational researchers.

Firstly, the book represents an 'archaeological' process. By this I mean that Robbins offers us a number of painstaking excavations of important connections between Bourdieu's thinking and various strands of philosophical thought. Many educationalists with a sociological bent will know something of the influence of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Schutz or Berger and Luckmann, but perhaps fewer will know much about the significance of the work of Kant, Cassirer, Leibniz, Vuillemin, Husserl or Merleau-Ponty (amongst others), and the links and contrasts between them. What Robbins does is to help us make useful connections between ideas and their historical location and development. To take just two examples, we can read of the likely influences on Bourdieu of phenomenology in general (and Husserl in particular) (e.g. p. 91), or Kant and Cassirer (e.g. pp. 185–196) and in so doing, better understand key features of a Bourdieusian approach to the social world. We better appreciate Bourdieu's insistence that the subjectivism/objectivism distinction, far

from being an inescapable precondition for knowing, is actually something to be transcended by good social science; in seeing Bourdieu's empathy with the shift brought to bear by Einstein on Newtonian physics, we understand a little more about his strong advocacy of the *relational*, in other words that the business of the social scientist is the study of relationships, fields and forces as much as of individuals, items and essences.

Secondly, like any good writing that draws upon Bourdieu, this book is a reminder of the need to question some conventional ideas about theory and method. For Bourdieu, theory is not something to be constructed so that it exists in a separate, abstract realm. Rather, theory is method, insofar as it constitutes the use of tools that previous empirical work suggests are useful, and points out how these might be brought to bear in new situations. More than anything else, a failure to understand this gives rise to misreadings and disappointments with what Bourdieu has to offer. Similarly, sociological understanding is never 'for its own sake', but always has a practical purpose, providing people with a means to understand and 'modify the life chances which they inherit' (p. 58), a point Bourdieu underlined in his later work and in the documentary film *Sociology as a Combat Sport*. Robbins illustrates how a strong neo-Kantian strain in Bourdieu's thinking leads away from the idea of theory as a totalising and predictive edifice, and how there is no claim in Bourdieu's work that a sociological analysis should preclude other kinds of understanding (p. 161).

Bourdieu's writing on method can be particularly challenging to Anglo-Saxon traditions. In one of the best chapters in the book (pp. 507–540), Robbins offers a good explanation of 'the need for an epistemological break'. Bourdieu borrows this term from Bachelard. Such a 'break' occurs when the social scientist recognises that 'the pre-constructed is everywhere' and is aware of the important difference between social problems and sociological problems. Scientific facts are necessarily *constructed*: the methods and processes set up to achieve them must avoid simply reproducing the accepted modes of understanding to be found in any situation, especially amongst the most powerful voices in that situation. This argument is a genuine challenge to the idea that the outcomes of research have to be simple to be practical. It also questions comfortable notions of 'respondent validation' or 'user engagement', thought by some to offer the educational researcher a royal road to validity.

Thirdly, this book assists contemporary educational researchers to look around them and notice more about the *fields* within which they are located. As Bryan Turner discusses in his preface, Robbins' account takes proper note of the relevant social and political movements, most notably the 'populist authoritarianism' of Thatcherism. There is also discussion of the disillusionment on the part of both Bourdieu and Robbins with 'third way' politics and the continuation of the individualism, inequality, performativity and managerialism of neo-liberalism. In relation to a different *field*, the book is unusual for its frank and detailed discussion (though it is expressly 'without acrimony') of the relationship between the publishing industry and the availability and reception of ideas. This is, of course, a very 'Bourdieusian' thing to do. At one point, Robbins suggests that a book he worked on for several years that was due to be published by Polity was in the end rejected because it would have offered a type of critique unwanted by a publisher who, by that time, had the major stake in the Bourdieu brand. Robbins says this may be of interest because '… in the background, there lay the tensions of the relations between Bourdieu and Giddens and, therefore, the anomaly that Giddens, as one of the founding directors of Polity, should be primarily respon-

sible for establishing Bourdieu's global reputation whilst, perhaps, neutralising his social and political impact' (p. 68). At the very least, the discussion here is a powerful reminder of the role that publishing and its markets play in how certain ideas come to be noticed.

Fourthly, there has been a tendency to see what Bourdieu has to offer the study of education in rather limited terms, as only or primarily to do with the role of education in the reproduction of social class. Robbins reminds us that important though this remains, Bourdieu's work provides tools for a much broader, moral concern with *all* social mechanisms and processes of domination. Both the rationale and the conduct of research are to be understood ethically. The book is full of examples that illustrate this point, including Robbins' analysis of the fortunes of Independent Study programmes at the University of East London.

There are no serious weaknesses in this book. Some readers may find parts of the text to be a little dense, especially if they are coming to the philosophical material for the first time. Others may wish that the book carried a conventional conclusion. On this latter point, there is in fact a conclusion of sorts in the form of a short penultimate chapter of Part One, entitled 'Full Circle'. This offers the view that a consideration of Bourdieu '… provides a conceptual perspective on the policies of the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour parties which is not readily available within the field of British discourse' (p. 101), a point which echoes the main message about what Bourdieu offers educational researchers in some of my own work with Michael Grenfell (e.g. Grenfell & James, 1998). The chapter also sets out various affinities between Robbins and Bourdieu in the intellectual projects that have preoccupied them, and highlights the need for a questioning of the individualistic notions of the social that characterise contemporary policy in Britain. This notwithstanding, it is actually difficult to envisage how a final concluding chapter would deal with the many intricate and connected themes that appear in the preceding 576 pages, without being either rather bland, or conversely, giving too much emphasis to a narrow selection of arguments.

This is not really a book for newcomers to Bourdieu's ideas, unless they happen to have a good grounding in philosophy; there are plenty of other books to go to first, including Harker *et al.* (1990), Grenfell (2004) and one of Derek Robbins' own earlier works (Robbins, 1998). To some extent, the book remains a 'reader', a chronological collection of previously published pieces with a reflexive front-end. In his preface, Bryan Turner says 'The book is a socio-analytic narrative of … [Robbins'] intellectual responses to the challenge delivered by Bourdieu's notion of a reflexive sociology' (p. XV). This is a good summary, because the most fundamental point about reflexivity for Bourdieu is that we have to recognise and articulate the relationship between the researcher and the object of study, and how this relationship shapes the scientific endeavour. For me, the book constitutes a rich—in places fascinating—account of Bourdieusian thinking. It is an excellent resource for reference, and something to be visited and revisited to illuminate the origins, reception and ramifications of Bourdieu's ideas and their continuing significance for educational research.

## References

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**Developing creativity in higher education: an imaginative curriculum**
Norman Jackson, Martin Oliver, Malcolm Shaw and James Wisdom (Eds), 2006
London, RoutledgeFalmer
£25.99 (pbk), 236 pp.
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If there is one message that stands out from this book, it is that creativity is an elusive, contested concept. Is it therefore worthy of consideration within a higher education context? The contributors of this volume make a convincing case that it is. This edited collection grew out of the Imaginative Curriculum network project, funded by the Learning and Teaching Support Network's Generic Centre and later the Higher Education Academy. The contributions are not just 'musings' on creativity, but are mainly research-based and theoretical essays on the potential role of creativity in higher education. What these contributions prompt while reading it is a great deal of reflection about the notion of creativity. What is creativity, how can it be fostered, how do we recognise it and how can it be assessed?

There is a fair amount of consensus throughout the research evidence in this book that in fact creativity is understood in similar terms across different disciplines. Key concepts that arise throughout the book in conceptualisations of creativity are originality, imagination, innovation, making connections and links, and risk-taking. The question is whether the higher education system's emphasis on employability, predicted learning outcomes and norm-referenced assessment methods creates tensions in relation to developing a creative ethos. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the evidence presented suggests that creativity is not highly valued in the dominant discourses of higher education. As one example, an analysis of the Quality Assurance Agency's subject benchmarks by Norman Jackson and Malcolm Shaw reveals, there is little emphasis on creativity as a desired outcome of curricula.

There are several points that stood out for me from reading this fascinating book. Firstly, the fostering of creativity requires a particular environment. As Margaret Edwards and colleagues state in their chapter on academics' perspectives on creativity: 'A stressed academic, like a stressed student, is rarely creative' (p. 73). The undoubtedly negative influence of the dominant research culture on developing imaginative curricula is noted by James Wisdom (p. 184), and he also draws attention to the pressing need for a climate more conducive to critical reflection in relation to teaching. As someone familiar with the current climate in UK higher education, I feel much sympathy with these concerns. It is difficult to imagine how most academics would be able to carve out the thinking space necessary for truly creative curricular developments, even though many would agree about its importance.