

BOOK REVIEWS

Why knowledge matters in curriculum: a social realist argument, by Leesa Wheelahan, Abingdon, Routledge, 2010, 191 pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN10: 0-415-48318-2

Education, epistemology and critical realism, by David Scott, Abingdon, Routledge, 2010, 146 pp., £90.00 (hardback), ISBN10: 0-415-47349-7

These two books each occupy a particular territory but they share a common source of intellectual energy. David Scott's book, *Education, epistemology and critical realism*, examines ways of approaching educational research; Leesa Wheelahan's book, *Why knowledge matters in curriculum*, explores contemporary approaches in the construction of the curriculum, especially the postcompulsory curriculum. Both books, however, seek to demonstrate, within their own territories, the validity, the power and the superiority of 'critical realism'. As the two books implicitly demonstrate, 'critical realism' – especially as advanced by Roy Bhaskar – has recently become very influential and not only in educational studies but across a broad range of research endeavours. (Both books are part of the series *New Studies in Critical Realism and Education*, the overall editor of which is Roy Bhaskar himself.)

Among the tenets of the philosophy of critical realism are the twofold claims that there is a real – or 'intransitive' – world (hence it is realist and that therefore the 'ontological' realm is important in our knowing enquiries); *and* that we can attempt to come into a relationship with that world through our 'transitive' enquiries, over which there can be radical dispute engendering debate and even dispute (hence it is critical and that therefore the 'epistemological' realm is also important in our enquiries). This view of the relationship of knowledge and the world produces a 'depth ontology', in which is distinguished the realms of the real, the actual and the empirical. Too often, it is claimed, both curriculum policies and research methodologies underplay the ontological (the 'real') while giving undue prominence to (empirical) surface phenomena.

This philosophical stance is brought into play to help the authors as they contend against quite different targets. For Wheelahan, the main target is a perspective on curriculum that has played up a sense that knowledge is 'socially constructed' although, as Wheelahan observes, there has been here a strange unwitting alliance between 'progressive' educationalists and 'conservative' educational attempts to drive forward performative and competence-based curricula. As a result, the sense there is a real world with which the student might struggle to come to grips has been downplayed. This has had a particularly pernicious effect so far as the vocational curriculum is concerned, since it is largely students from poorer backgrounds that follow such curricula. Consequently, such students are liable to become disenfranchised from the conversations of the world that – in the different disciplines – *are* focused on seriously trying to understand the world. For Scott, the target appears to be principally twofold: positivist methodologies that give undue prominence to immediate experience and pragmatist approaches that look to the practical applicability of research. In their different ways, both approaches adopt limited conceptions of truthfulness in comparison with critical theory and so offer only partial readings of the world.

In summarising these two books in this way, I am conscious that I have already done injury to each of them. Both are rich, scholarly, and rigorous. Each is a demanding text, making its arguments carefully, though perhaps for slightly different audiences – although, for me, Wheelahan's text is the more accessible and expansive. Research students in the sociology of education are especially likely to derive benefit from Scott's book; a broad audience could well be attracted to Wheelahan's book, especially those concerned with the design of vocational curricula.

Their theses, too, take contrasting routes. Wheelahan offers an interweaving of the perspectives of Basil Bernstein – particularly on the sociology of knowledge (in its contrasting of esoteric knowledge as vertical discourse with mundane knowledge as horizontal discourse, the latter being unable to act as a driver of change) – and of Bhaskar's critical realism. For Wheelahan, the two perspectives are complementary: Bernsteinian sociology of knowledge is strong on the social framing of knowledge but lacks an ontology (and thereby an epistemology); critical realism is strong on ontology and insistent that there is a world that our knowing efforts can and should struggle to understand but is less strong on the social character of those knowing efforts. This book has to be seen as assisting contemporary efforts to supply a much-needed corrective to often well-meaning curriculum policies that, at their centre, have a concern for the social location of the student. All too often, such policies unwittingly would serve to limit students' educational horizons: what is needed, therefore, is the working out of a 'commitment to realism'.

Scott takes the reader very carefully – and even painstakingly – through key issues in the methodology of educational research such as ontology and epistemology, structure and agency, relativism, making educational judgements and quantitative/qualitative approaches. On each issue, arguments are marshalled and systematically weighed, all the time being especially informed by a critical realist perspective. Throughout, there is an insistence that ontological and epistemological dimensions be understood as distinctive, even though in human affairs, such as education, there is a need also to attend to their interaction. This consideration leads both to the need for researchers to have an eye to some kind of 'bridging device' so as to bring the two domains into a proper relationship with each other and to the playing up in the book of the structure-agency relationship. A postscript includes an initial set of suggestions as to the implications of the book's argument for curriculum design.

In what remains of this brief review, I will risk causing further injury to the two texts by picking out and commenting on a single matter that each one raises for me. The value of a critical realist perspective for educational researchers – Scott's line – tacitly points to two domains in which critical realism comes into play: a critical realist perspective can come into play (i) in the researcher's understanding of phenomena in the world; and it can come into play (ii) in understanding the researcher's own relationship to the phenomena being studied. Actually, in educational research, domain (i) is itself characteristically two fields: (a) the way in which critical realism can inform the view of and actions in the world of the subject being studied (a teacher's identity; a student's approach to learning); (b) the 'world' in which subjects – say, teachers or students – have their professional and educational being. So there are at least three levels in which a critical realist perspective can play a part. However, if this is right, then yet further issues arise as to the relationships between these levels of understanding and of the work that critical realism might do in them. *That work*, I think, lies ahead of attempts to show the value of critical realism in educational research; and Scott acknowledges this himself. This is important because such work might reveal limitations in a critical realist philosophy, not least in its possibly underplaying individuals' dispositions, desires, values and imaginative powers and the potential of imaginative concepts to transform 'real' structures.

A second issue is prompted especially by Wheelahan's thesis. We are told that 'Theoretical knowledge that is organized in disciplinary frameworks is society's collective representations about the causal mechanisms the disciplines study by exploring the relationship between the

real, actual and empirical' (149), but this is surely an unduly narrow conception of academic disciplines. Is this not a conception of knowledge that, in its concern with 'causal mechanisms' privileges scientific modes of thought? This suspicion is deepened through the remark that 'academic disciplines provide access to the natural and social worlds' (70) but what of the humanities that characteristically attempt to provide insights into what it is to be human, which includes what it is to be a person, with feelings, interpretations, imagination and intentions?

Do we see here, perhaps, a double limitation in the critical realism project, in that it poses a 'real' world at its centre and then attempts to work out the relationship of understanding to that world: such a philosophy underplays both the felt sense of being human and, even more importantly, the role of the imagination in bringing new worlds and different worlds into view. This is crucial for a genuinely emancipatory curriculum and pedagogy for part of such an education will surely lie in liberating students' imaginative powers so that they can bring their own worlds into view; so that, in effect, they can become poets and creators of new worlds. Emancipation surely ultimately requires an *imaginative* emergence from the 'given' world into a new, although still feasible, world.

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Accountability in higher education: global perspectives on trust and power, edited by Bjorn Stensaker and Lee Harvey, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, 270 pp., £33.99 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-415-87196-9

Accountability in higher education: global perspectives on trust and power provides the latest contribution to the Routledge series *International Studies in Higher Education* (edited by David Palfreyman, Ted Tapper and Scott Thomas). The series collates case studies and comparative analyses which demonstrates different interpretations of critical developments in key aspects surrounding significant policy developments in higher education across the world. The central theme of this book is about the accountability initiatives which are increasingly being introduced to higher education. The book provides a global overview of many different schemes all of which have been designed in response to the various challenges being faced by higher education. The book also presents some theoretical reflections that try to provide possible insights of the resulting long-term consequences. Underpinning the book is a premise that all round the world in whatever way higher education has traditionally been organised, currently, systems are facing fundamental shifts in their individual characteristics. This is resulting in transitions in the relationships between higher education with the state and the society in which it operates. The book uses specific case studies to analysis this perspective.

In the early chapters of the book we are provided with an outline of what accountability can mean, the historical origins of what it can be for and how it can work. Stensaker and Harvey (eds) question if the promises made for accountability schemes can outweigh some of the problems associated with them. They outline three dimensions which provide themes for the subsequent chapters. These are firstly the 'power' dimension, considering what accountability schemes look like they question why different schemes have been established and why different groups can be influential. Secondly they suggest that by considering broader contexts about how the information created by accountability schemes can be interpreted and used to change the values of higher education the possibility of using the information to improving the function and