

The Politics of Change: Publishing, policy and practice

Peter Roberts

University of Canterbury

I have a special fondness for ACCESS. My first academic publication—a brief review (Roberts, 1985)—appeared in its pages, and over the years a number of other full-length articles followed (Roberts, 1992, 1997, 1998, 2002). I have also had one of my books (Roberts, 1999) reviewed in the journal (Marshall, 2000), and I have refereed manuscripts submitted by others. More importantly, perhaps, several of the key figures associated with the journal have played significant roles in my formation as an intellectual. I was a student at the University of Auckland when the journal was founded in 1982, and from 1983 to 1986 was taught in various Education courses by Jim Marshall and Colin Lankshear. Colin supervised my Masters thesis on Paulo Freire's concept of conscientisation in 1987, and he and I have remained in contact since that time. Michael Peters was pivotal in shaping the focus and direction of the journal in the 1990s, and he and I have published four books and numerous articles together. I served on the Editorial Board of the journal from 1995 to 2001, and I have always been happy to recommend ACCESS as a publication outlet for colleagues and doctoral students. The emphasis, from the mid-1990s, on themed issues has, in my view, been a particular strength of the journal. In my teaching at both undergraduate and Masters levels, I have often referred students to these issues (particularly those relating to universities and the knowledge society) as helpful resources for their research. This paper reflects on some of the themes addressed in my own publications in the journal and considers their relevance to more recent developments in educational policy and practice.

I

The first full-length article I published in ACCESS was a piece on adult literacy research (Roberts, 1992). While this is no longer a key area of research for me, two features of that article continue to be relevant to my work as a university teacher and researcher. First, in providing a critical review of the existing literature on adult literacy, I argued a case for the value of a philosophical perspective in that field of inquiry. At the time, such an approach was relatively novel. In the two decades since that time, work in what Brian Street (1993) has called the "new literacy studies" has flourished, and those writing in this area have drawn on a wide range of theoretical traditions, some explicitly philosophical, in their research. For me, a philosophical orientation was consistent with the broader focus of my educational work. At the University of Auckland, I had taken multiple courses in both educational philosophy and the sociology of education, supplementing these with forays into the history of education and comparative education, among other areas. Shortly after taking up my first academic appointment as a Junior Lecturer at the University of Waikato in February 1988, it became clear to me that I wanted to make philosophy of education my primary focus. The influence of Colin Lankshear and Jim Marshall during my years as a student at the University of Auckland was important in inclining me in this direction. My ACCESS article on adult literacy was a step along the way in clarifying the contribution philosophical knowledge and skills could make to educational

theory and practice. The second feature of that article of ongoing significance for my research life was the reference to Paulo Freire as a thinker with much to offer literacy studies. In particular, my interest was in what he could teach us about the ethics of literacy education. In the years that were to follow, I would publish many books and papers on Freire's work, and the broader concern with the ethics of education remains a key interest today.

Having moved back to the University of Auckland to take up an appointment in February 1995, I became more actively involved with the journal and was invited on a number of occasions to contribute to themed issues. I was not able to accept all such invitations, with a list of commitments that kept growing as the twenty-first century rolled around, but tried to do so as often as circumstances would allow. My 1997 paper appeared in a special issue on qualifications policy edited by Patrick Fitzsimons. In the 1990s changes initiated by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and other government bodies were hotly debated in educational circles. Successive National governments had pushed the process of neoliberal reform inaugurated by Labour into almost every sector of social life. Where Labour had concentrated on economic restructuring, National set out to apply the rules of the market to key social policy domains such as health, education and welfare. The reach of neoliberal ideas into education was extensive, and with it came a new language: one that spoke of choice, consumers, competition, performance, and accountability. My piece for the special issue (Roberts, 2007) paid particular attention to the Government's newly released Green Paper, "A Future Qualifications Policy for New Zealand" (Ministry of Education, 1997). I drew attention to a number of concessions that had been made in the Green Paper: it was acknowledged that the qualifications reform process had, in some respects, been too expensive, cumbersome and time-consuming, and was proving highly unpopular. Unit standards had come in for special criticism. A willingness to listen more closely to the views of those with academic expertise in the area was implied. At the same time, it was evident that many of the distinguishing features of earlier reforms remained. Underlying the Green Paper was a tacit approval of the notion of "provider capture" advanced rather infamously by the New Zealand Treasury in the 1980s. I argued that the Green Paper continued to place excessive weight on satisfying the demands of employers, on becoming "flexible" as students and workers, and on becoming economically competitive on the international stage. Skills were dominant over knowledge. I commented on possible future developments, where emerging approaches to measuring and tracking student progress could be combined with new developments in information technology, with potentially sinister consequences for the monitoring and control of citizens.

My next paper for ACCESS was at the behest of Amarjit Dhillon, who was tragically killed in a car accident not long after organising the themed issue in which the paper appeared. It was an issue on the new information and communication technologies and my piece (Roberts, 1998) addressed the possibility of electronic solutions to the 'crisis' in scholarly publishing. I identified several features of this alleged crisis: escalating subscription costs, shortages in space, and unacceptable delays in the publication process. I also discussed the trend toward increasingly specialisation and considered what this might mean for the further development of scholarly knowledge. I supported the move to electronic publishing as a means for addressing these concerns, while also stressing the need for some caution. In particular, I pointed to the importance of sophisticated 'filtering' systems in maintaining academic rigour. I concluded that publication by digital means had the potential to enhance scholarly communication, allowing more immediate circulation of findings and ideas, while also opening up new possibilities for peer review and academic dialogue.

The last of my articles published in the journal was a piece on "Postmodernity, tertiary education and the new knowledge discourses" (Roberts, 2002). This paper was an invited response to the Macmillan Brown Lectures delivered by Michael Peters. After briefly summarising some of the key points in Peters' lectures, I expressed broad agreement with the position he advanced while also delineating a few minor points of difference. I pointed out that Freire does not fit as neatly into the Hegelian model as Peters had suggested. I also problematised the notion of "taking leave" of modernity, stressing the need to acknowledge the multiplicity of "modernisms" as well as the

plurality of postmodern positions. As a third point of departure, and as a bridge to the remaining discussion in the paper, I contended that the neoliberal conditions we found ourselves in at that time were, in some important respects, as much modern as postmodern. I went on to examine developments in New Zealand tertiary education policy, giving credit for some improvements under the Labour-Alliance coalition government formed in 1999, while arguing nonetheless that the “Third Way” was to a significant extent still a neoliberal way. The commodification of knowledge, a process already well underway before the 1999 election, had continued unabated and indeed had been pushed in new directions, as was clear in the newly released Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2002). The logic of performativity too had continued to prevail and evolve in tertiary education institutions. Finally, for all the talk of “knowledge” in policy documents of that time, surprisingly little consideration had been given to fundamental epistemological questions. I concluded that while the Labour-Alliance government had adopted a better informed and more intellectually robust approach to tertiary education than the National government it replaced, and had made moves toward greater social inclusiveness, neoliberal thinking continued to haunt policy decision-making.

II

Reviewing these papers for the purposes of this article has been a rather unusual experience but also an interesting one, for in reading through this body of work again I am struck by how little some things change. We are now more than a quarter of a century on from the first wave of neoliberal reform initiated by the fourth Labour government in 1984. Marketisation, the phenomenon that cast such a dominant shadow over education policy in the 1990s, now seems to be accepted by many as a permanent reality, particularly at the tertiary level. It is true that the mantra of “choice, choice and more choice” that marked the 1990s phase of marketisation had dissipated, and steps have been taken (belatedly) to reduce the proliferation of new tertiary education “providers” that accompanied this rhetoric. But the principle of competition, and with it the drive to position institutions effectively within national and international tertiary education markets, has become more entrenched than ever. University leaders now talk regularly about their institutional “brand”, and millions of dollars continue to be devoted to marketing budgets each year. The competitive ethos has also trumped collegiality and cooperation in other areas, with, for example, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) encouraging a more individualistic, instrumentalist approach to research than we could have imagined in the universities of just a few decades ago. “Performance” is the order of the day now, as it was in the 1990s, but this has become tied even more tightly to perception. The growth in postgraduate student numbers is fuelling a stronger drive to recruit internationally, and with this there is now a greater sensitivity to the importance of ranking systems that compare one university to another.

We have witnessed the arrival of new policy documents, and some new terms and phrases have crept into bureaucratic consciousness. As has been noted elsewhere (Roberts, 2008), however, there is a depressing sameness to much that is promoted as new. The best the Labour-led government could come up as a catch-phrase in its second Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2006) was the notion of providing “quality, relevant” tertiary education. National’s efforts in developing a similar strategy following the general election of 2008 have been no more inspiring, with little more than a reassertion of the need for tertiary education to advance international economic competitiveness (Ministry of Education, 2009). The Government’s stated vision is to create “a world-leading education system that equips all New Zealanders with the knowledge, skills and values to be successful citizens in the 21st century”. Such a system, it is noted, “is an important first step towards a productive and growing economy that delivers greater prosperity, security and opportunity for all New Zealanders” (2009: 6). In her Minister’s Foreword, Anne Tolley warns readers that the Government “will not be able to draw on new money for some time”. This means we will have to “lift the performance of the tertiary education sector so that more people complete

qualifications and go on to find good employment". Tertiary institutions will need to "deliver the knowledge New Zealand needs to meet the challenges of the future". Changes will be evident as an effort is made to make tertiary education "more relevant and efficient, so that it meets the needs of students, the labour market and the economy" (2).

Such statements could have come from almost any policy document on tertiary education produced by a New Zealand government in the last twenty years. This is, however, not merely a case of bureaucratic blandness; documents of this kind demonstrate the rigidity of political thought in addressing questions of economic and social change. The Minister claims that '[n]ew ideas will be a driving force behind helping businesses to compete on the global stage' (2), yet there is a profound lack of imagination in the development of policy. "New ideas" may be valued but only in strictly limited ways. One might admire the enterprise and inventiveness of those who are successful in the world of business, and no one would dispute the need to work efficiently and effectively with the resources provided for tertiary education. But there is nothing of substance in current policy thinking that speaks to the importance of new ideas in, say, understanding what it means to be human, or in addressing the urgent problems of world poverty and environmental destruction. The current world economic crisis, far from prompting a searching examination by governments (including our own) of the very nature of late capitalism and its inherent destructiveness, appears to have prompted a reassertion of many tenets of neoliberal orthodoxy. Knowledge, more than ever it seems, must be reduced to nothing more than information and skills, to be traded in the same way as other commodities in a competitive world marketplace.

This sense of sameness is also prevalent in other educational sectors. The obsession with measurement that was already evident in the NZQA reforms now exerts an extraordinary influence over life in schools as well as universities. The introduction of National Standards and the determination to publish "league tables" comparing schools on dubious "achievement" data, hallmarks of National Party education policy from 2008 to the present day, are consistent with this mentality. More than this, though, the very logic of the NCEA system, with its tendency to break all knowledge down into discrete, measurable parts, is a continuation of the same thinking that underpinned the first talk of unit standards more than two decades ago. We now seem unable to conceive of any aspect of the educational process beyond assessment. The idea of pursuing education and knowledge for their own sake is now often regarded as simple, romantic nonsense. The message conveyed implicitly to every New Zealand school student today is that if learning is not measured in some way, it does not matter. Indeed, merely imposing the cult of measurement on students is no longer seen as sufficient; it is deemed necessary to inculcate parents into the same culture of performativity. Thus, giving feedback to students and parents via reports will not do; there has to be some form of ranking, within schools, or between schools, or across the students year group nationally, or even across different countries.

In some ways, however, the world has changed quite significantly. At the time at which I was authoring the piece on electronic publishing, print was still the primary medium for the publication of respected academic journals. Those days are long gone. Almost every major scholarly journal is now available online, even if there is also a print version available. The notion of going to a (physical) library, seeking out the relevant volumes of a journal, and standing over a photocopier to produce a hard copy of an article would now seem disturbingly cumbersome and time-consuming to many students. Ready access to extensive collections of electronic journals and databases has become the norm for scholars in most universities, and there is little evidence to suggest anything significant has been lost in this transition. The task of sifting through large volumes of information has become more momentous and important than ever, but the digital age has also supplied a range of resources for coping with this. In other areas of technological development, there is cause for great concern. In a post-9/11 world, tracking mechanisms of multiple kinds have, as feared, become more numerous and invasive, albeit often in quite subtle ways. Most alarming of all, perhaps, is the widespread acceptance of such surveillance and control as either benign or undisputedly necessary, with surprisingly little questioning and debate. This trend is consistent with the situation of terror

described by Lyotard (1984) more than three decades ago and seems likely to continue in the years ahead.

III

Meeting the brief for this paper has entailed taking a more autobiographical approach than is usually the case in my work. It is both pleasing and disturbing that much of what I had to say in earlier ACCESS articles still holds true today. The world has moved on, and I have too, but there are some things that haven't changed. The New Zealand education policy landscape is, in several key senses, a territory in need of radical reworking. ACCESS has an important role to play in contributing to the kind of critical discourse that calls policy makers into account and poses alternatives to dominant modes of social and economic thought. It is my hope that the journal will continue to publish rigorous papers by internationally renowned scholars and enjoy a wide readership over the next thirty years of its existence.

References

- Lyotard, J-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. (Original work published 1979).
- Marshall, J. (2000). Review of P. Roberts (Ed.) (1999). *Paulo Freire, Politics and Pedagogy: Reflections from Aotearoa-New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press. *ACCESS: Critical perspectives on cultural and policy studies in education*, 19(2), 132-135.
- Ministry of Education (1997). *A Future Qualifications Policy for New Zealand: Green Paper*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education (2002). *Tertiary Education Strategy*. Wellington: Office of the Associate Minister of Education, Tertiary Education.
- Ministry of Education (2006). *Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-12*. Wellington: Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education.
- Ministry of Education (2009). *Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-15*. Wellington: Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education.
- Roberts, P. (1985). Computers and Education, review of one chapter in P.D.K. Ramsay (1984). *Family, School and Community*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin. *Access*, 4(1).
- Roberts, P. (1992). Adult Literacy Research: What does philosophy have to offer?. *ACCESS: Critical Perspectives on Education Policy*, 11(1), 13-25.
- Roberts, P. (1997). Qualifications Policies and the Marketisation of Education: a critical reading of the Green Paper. *ACCESS: Critical perspectives on cultural and policy studies in education*, 16(2), 31-47.
- Roberts, P. (1998). The Crisis in Scholarly Publishing: Exploring electronic solutions. *ACCESS: Critical perspectives on cultural and policy studies in education*, 17(1), 1-16.
- Roberts, P. (1999) (Ed.). *Paulo Freire, Politics and Pedagogy: Reflections from Aotearoa-New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Roberts, P. (2002). Postmodernity, Tertiary Education and the New Knowledge Discourses. *ACCESS: Critical perspectives on communication, cultural and policy studies*, 21(1), 53-60.
- Roberts, P. (2008). Beyond the Rhetoric of "Quality" and "Relevance": Evaluating the Tertiary Education Strategy, 2007-12. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 17, 41-57.
- Street, B. (1993). The New Literacy Studies, guest editorial. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 16(2), 81-97.