

The scene of the classroom

Chris Peers

Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

Prakash Nair has made comments about the kind of spatial planning that educationists should make for the purpose of improving, and refining the architectural model of the school that can be adopted in the twenty-first century. These remarks imply that an “old” and out-dated architectural model needs to be replaced by one that is better suited to the kinds of workers that children will become when they graduate, so that schools can more effectively prepare students for the workforce to come. In this article, I argue that his proclamation that “the classroom is obsolete” should be interpreted in the context of neo-liberalism, alongside similarly hyperbolic claims by Francis Fukuyama in 1989 that the fall of the Berlin Wall signified the “end of history”. By addressing the rhetorical structure of such remarks, I deconstruct Prakash Nair’s promise to build a better future for education. Additionally, I argue that educational researchers may benefit from thinking of the classroom as a fictional place, a “scene” that does not always bear identical and universal attributes, owing to the diversity of cultural and geographical contexts in which classrooms are found.

KEYWORDS

Derrida; classroom;
deconstruction

ARTICLE HISTORY

First published in
Educational Philosophy and Theory, 2017, Vol. 49, No. 8,
822–831

Introduction

In 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. A conservative scholar named Francis Fukuyama responded by proclaiming the ‘end of history’: he announced the ‘triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*’ (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 3; emphasis in original) a statement that was then interpreted by a series of equally right-wing commentators as signalling a ‘glorious victory ...’.

of justice, of freedom over tyranny, the rallying of all good and reasonable men and women ... it is the ideas of freedom and equality that have animated the West and have won by convincing almost all nations that they are true, by destroying the intellectual and political foundations of alternative understandings of justice. (Bloom, 1989, p. 19)

The confidence with which conservatives declared the end of history in 1989 was consonant with the advent of neo-liberalism, and it is in that context that, I argue here, we may interpret the proclamation by Prakash Nair that the classroom is ‘obsolete’ (Nair, 2011).

Recognising Prakash Nair, an architect, as a representative of neo-liberalism (which is generally visible in its politico-economic form) may be challenging for some in the field of education. That may be in part due to the relative inattention that educational architecture has attracted, at least among teacher educators and the broad community of education researchers.¹

The task as I see it is best approached by noticing, at the outset, some obvious differences between the rhetoric adopted by Nair and that of people like Fukuyama and Bloom: Nair is not so

explicitly concerned with the notions of triumph and victory, freedom and tyranny. But the hyperbole that contemporary readers might recognise in these post-Berlin Wall remarks is matched by the marketing ‘hype’ that is recognisable in much of the published commentary credited to Prakash Nair with respect to his programme of re-design for schools in the twenty-first century.

The problem I am pointing to is: that unless we clarify the meaning of a phrase like the ‘classroom is obsolete’, the paradoxical implications of that phrase could be missed, as could claims about the ‘end of history’. The paradoxical nature of Nair’s proclamation rests, initially, on a recognition that it assumes the classroom to be a historical object, i.e. it exists in historical time.² From this initial premise, the reader is placed in the difficult position of rationalising how ‘obsolescence’ is to be recognisable, since it refers to an object (the classroom) that continues to be used (not just a little bit, but pervasively). Being ‘historical’ should usually mean that the classroom exists on a trajectory that includes the present as well as the future, and that the classroom is not, therefore, simply being cast into a dead past.

Further, uses of the classroom will undoubtedly continue to be relevant, even highly productive, and therefore satisfying to the purposes of the Western education system, not to mention in developing economies. How can the classroom be obsolete i.e. redundant, out-of-date, no longer in use, while it is still being used? Not only is it still being used, but Nair himself in fact merely suggests a modification to its design.³

I think that this lends me a useful comparison to Fukuyama’s hyperbolic proclamation of the ‘end of history’, insofar as it, too, is a supremely historical statement: in other words, Fukuyama positions himself as looking backward, from a position of transcendental privilege, outside history, yet having experienced enough history to enjoy the good fortune of being able to recognise that it is over. Naming something ‘historical’ becomes possible from an *anti-historical* perspective. Jacques Derrida referred to Fukuyama, accordingly, as a ‘latecomer’, emphasising both the inescapable chronology of his remarks, their inherently historiographic aspect, as well as the debt that those remarks owe to older thinkers, to earlier proclamations of a similar ‘apocalypse’ (Brantlinger, 1998, pp. 64–65; Derrida, 1994, p. 16).

The ‘existence’ of the classroom

Hyperbole might seem all too common these days, almost banal, in a Western world saturated by marketing; I have begun this discussion by drawing special attention to ‘hype’ because it highlights the rhetorical structure of Prakash Nair’s remarks. The first part of this discussion explains what I mean when I use the term ‘rhetoric’, and places Nair’s public commentary within a rhetorical context. There are in fact different kinds of rhetoric employed by him, for example, when Nair asserts that the architectural model of ‘the’ classroom is a ‘relic, left over from the Industrial Revolution, which required a large workforce with very basic skills’ (Nair, 2011). I propose to deal with this assertion by analysing the different structural elements of this rhetoric. For the sake of a summary explanation, the two basic forms of rhetoric I identify are remarks designed to persuade (‘the classroom is obsolete’) and second, remarks that can be analysed as entailing the production of metaphor as trope and figure (‘the classroom is a relic’).

The first statement is indicative i.e. it (purportedly) asserts a fact, whereas the second is expressive, i.e. it conveys an ideal meaning (Lawlor, 2011, p. xiii). Nair’s argument might seem to function hierarchically: it might seem as if the description of the classroom as a relic of the industrial revolution is a means of supporting, and illustrating the (prior) claim that the classroom is obsolete. In rhetorical terms, this could be seen to promote a hierarchy, in which facts take precedence over expressions. By analysing Nair’s public commentary as forms of rhetoric, I provide a means of attending to underlying ontological assumptions that Nair extends, whether he is aware of it, and intends to do so, or not.

Chief among these assumptions is a tacit demand, underlying, and preceding the question of obsolescence, which refers to the likelihood that everyone agrees that the classroom exists; this demand says that an acknowledgement about the nature of the existence of the classroom can and should be reached. Let us consider the possibility that Prakash Nair is operating from an empirical standpoint, treating the classroom as a phenomenon.

A phenomenal classroom *appears*: which is to say that it can be, *and is* perceived by an observer, a consciousness. To say that Nair may be treating the classroom phenomenally, is to say that it appears to him *in a given form*. Nair then gives us an expression to describe the form in which it appears: he refers to the classroom as a 'relic'. The first implication of this expression is that the classroom holds essential, observable attributes, that are always the same in each appearance of the classroom. These essential attributes render it equivalent in whatever physical, geographic or cultural context that it appears.

Second, we consider the connotations of the term 'relic'; the classroom is left-over, persisting with, holding on to, those essential attributes, despite the prevalence of changes, exterior to the classroom, that make those essential attributes less applicable to current circumstances. The term 'relic' is a way of expressing the 'fact' that the classroom is obsolete.

Now we come to the more complex ontological issues at stake in declaring that the classroom is obsolete; by doing so, Nair does not simply deny the usefulness of the classroom. He denies that the classroom can be repeated. That is, Nair's statement could be construed in terms of the character of the existence of the classroom. When I say I think he means that the classroom cannot be repeated, I mean that Nair's 'classroom' is not present to itself i.e. Nair does not identify the classroom as *fully* present, i.e. some part of the classroom is now in the past and has no future.

The terms of this 'self-present' ontology are better understood by noticing that the appearance of the classroom is an appearance *for Nair*, rather than a general statement of its existential character. Nair is the self for whom the classroom does not have full presence. The classroom, from Nair's perspective, within Nair's consciousness, has a presence that is more openly identifiable with the past, than with the future. To say the classroom is not present to itself is to say that the classroom no longer enjoys a possibility for infinity, for repeatability. It may be present, but it is only present just as it was, not as it could be. The classroom no longer enjoys a presence as an infinite object: we can only apprehend it as a memory. So the 'presence' of the classroom is split off from the ordinary, indefinite character of the chronological terms in which it can be apprehended.

This is another way of saying that Nair has not clearly articulated the basis of the classroom's obsolescence. For Nair, by himself, to think that the classroom is 'present' on the basis of his apprehension, is not a sufficient ground for the facticity of its obsolescence. The implication of saying that the classroom is obsolete is that Nair's classroom is both present and absent at the same time. The 'fact' that Nair advances is about the classroom lacking presence. If the classroom is not present to itself, it is no longer becoming. This also means that the classroom no longer enjoys the unity of form and content. Nair's declaration means that there is a fracturing of form from content, insofar as the purpose of educational activity can no longer safely be ascribed to it.

An empirical classroom

My sense of the insufficiency of Nair's phenomenal classroom is drawn from Derrida's critique of phenomenology (Derrida, 1989, 2011). This critique addresses the problems that arise when the consciousness of the observer is privileged, as the site at which language is generated. Language is thereby viewed as a tool of consciousness, used to indicate or express apprehensions, occurring to consciousness. In other words, Derrida is critical of the assumption that makes thought precede language, as if thought were not itself constituted by the occurrence of language.

In my extension of this critique to Prakash Nair's discussion of the obsolescence of the classroom, I am troubling the way he privileges his idea of the classroom. When Nair says the classroom can cease to enjoy a purpose accorded it within the traditions of educational culture, he is also saying that the classroom thereby loses some part of its existential status. In other words, if the statement that 'the classroom is obsolete' is to be regarded as a statement about the existence of the classroom, as well as a criticism of the design of the classroom, there is a problem: the classroom doesn't stop just because Prakash Nair says so.

I have taken this approach to Nair's statement because I think it gestures, however innocuously, at the privilege Nair accords to his own experience. There is a kind of arrogance that is not simply traceable to Prakash Nair, but to the rhetorical stance he assumes. The unexamined core of this rhetorical stance is, according to Derrida, a fault belonging to empiricism, in which the empiricist 'does not believe'

in the distinction between *truths of fact* and *truths of reason* ... The founding of truths of reason resides, not in any capacity for a priori knowledge, but in its relationship to this primitive and ultimate fact i.e. in the experience that has reason of it. (Descombes, 1979, p. 141)

Prakash Nair privileges his own experience (which is, in fact, his own representation to himself of the nature of his experience) to the extent that his idea of the world is, *a priori*, in perfect correlation with the world. As a result of having produced his idea of the world, purely on the basis of his apprehension, he is able to deduce the reliquary character of one tiny part (the obsolete classroom) of the greater historical current (the flowing river of educational history) that, in his mind, swirls inexorably around the classroom.

Nair has reduced the difference between the world, and his apprehension of it, to a representation of world history. In reducing the world to his idea of it, he cuts off any independent sense of world history and puts a future that Prakash Nair has conceived *in place of* a world-future. Nair imagines his own design for the future (especially of classrooms) on the basis of already having determined the difference between past and future *for himself*. In other words, the facticity of the obsolescence of the classroom depends on the prior existence of the consciousness of Prakash Nair, rather than on any objective dysfunction that could be readily ascribed to the classroom.

A world-future might also be empirical, but in Derrida's terms this is not dependent simply on being observable (a phenomenal position that privileges the observer's apprehension) but instead empiricism is 'necessarily always other' (Derrida, 2011, p. 43). Another way of saying this would be that Nair's world is not generalizable to every conscious individual. Nair can privilege his own idea of the world only by sacrificing any acknowledgement that the obsolescence of the classroom is not an event that everyone else can observe in the same way as him.

Moreover, to analyse the singularity of Nair's observation, we should pay proper attention to the fact that the classroom to which Nair refers is a classroom that Nair apprehended, and that in order to make his apprehension of it recognisable to everyone else, he is forced to refer to it, to signify that classroom, using language. Only within the medium of language can the presence and absence of Nair's classroom become comprehensible more generally. To paraphrase Derrida, an apprehension 'is never an event if event means an empirical singularity that is irreplaceable and irreversible' (Derrida, 2011, p. 42). But when Nair converts his idea of the world, with its tiny reliquary classroom, into linguistic discourse, he adopts signifiers that can be 'recognisable'

despite and across the diversity of the empirical characteristics that can modify it [By means of language, Nair's 'classroom' remains] the same and [can] be repeated as such, despite and across the deformations that what we call an empirical event makes it necessarily undergo. (Derrida, 2011, p. 43)

Nair does not invent the idea of the classroom; but he uses signs to refer to a relic, to the idea that 'we' in the broad community no longer need a relic, precisely because the classroom is now old and out-dated. These are ideas that can only be *referential* if everyone who reads about education

recognises the word 'classroom' to refer to the same thing. What Nair does not fully acknowledge is that the suggestion that the classroom is obsolete is itself a means for Nair to express his idea of the classroom i.e. Nair assumes a continuity between the empirical fact—everyone in education recognises the classroom to refer to the same thing—and the possibility of expressing his view, his idea, that the classroom is obsolete.

A rational classroom?

If it seems, to the reader, that there is a risk Prakash Nair is not, in fact, referring to the same classroom as everyone else, and that, in fact, his adoption of language is merely a necessary detour through a medium (language) by which it becomes possible to render *common*, that idea of a classroom that would never otherwise *be common*, then the reader has begun to comprehend the aim of my discussion. I am opening the possibility that there is no reality to which the word 'classroom' always refers: the classroom is not always the same in every single case. If this is provisionally acceptable, I propose further that what we educationists mean, what we refer to when we use the term 'classroom', is rather a fictional place. The possibility that the classroom is always fictional, never a universal reality, is what obstructs the claim about its obsolescence.

I must digress briefly at this point in my discussion in order to position the argument made so far, within the context of philosophical awareness of rhetorical strategies in educational discourse. This will help me to show that referring to a fictional classroom is important on a number of grounds. To regard the classroom as fictional is a way of disrupting the empiricism that prevails in educational discourse; what is ironic is that this disruptive strategy *employs* empiricism, at the same time that it disrupts the theoretical premises on which it is based; it does so to disclose the futility of pretending that there is an original, true classroom to which everyone is referring, all the time.

A benefit gained by pursuing this strategy might neatly be summarised as overcoming the rationality of a classroom that we must all agree upon. I am suggesting that 'we' (educationists, people who are specially interested in the function of the classroom) might be able to use a critique of rationality to recognise our own ideological values with respect to the classroom.

Back in 1984, writing about the 'social functions of the intellectual', Thomas Popkewitz suggested that 'knowledge systems are related to particular historical groups in society' and that, accordingly, 'our forms of reason and rationality embody limits and pathologies' (Popkewitz, 1984, p. 183). Popkewitz was alerting us to the risk that even scientifically informed 'knowledge', even seemingly 'rational' arguments, could be tainted by ideology.

Of course, this kind of argument opens up a different kind of risk, associated with the kinds of rhetoric that educational researchers adopt (among many other social scientists) to convey an argument. When criticising the meaning and value of rationality, Popkewitz could be accused of adopting a tone of rationality himself. This is not a trivial objection: when we read educational sociology, such as the work of Popkewitz, the reader can recognise a prosaic manner of addressing the topic: 'particular historical groups' might be interpreted as referring to a 'society', in a manner that assumes all of us belong to the same homogeneous historical community: that we all live on the same horizon of social experience.

Yet this prose is justified by the need to accustom a reader who is unaccustomed, to persuade them, which is another way of saying that Popkewitz is quite deliberate, not indifferent to, the style of his rhetoric.

We discover a hidden irony: Popkewitz uses a persuasive mode of speech to warn us, that *that very persuasive mode of speech* is identifiable with the kind of 'truth' that, as he would himself wish to persuade us, is ideological i.e. un-truth: 'a particular or relative discourse, seeking to pass itself off as universal or absolute' (Descombes, 1979, p. 137). Popkewitz is telling us that educational researchers are subject to ideological affiliations as much as might be the case in any other

intellectual discipline. This explains why Popkewitz repeatedly notes the fact that 'no theory is neutral or unattached' (Popkewitz, 1984, p. 183). Popkewitz' warning about ideology is a way of connecting the complexity of the role that intellectuals have (in general) with the form of rhetoric that they necessarily adopt when participating in discourse. Popkewitz knows that there is a trap laid for educational researchers by the attraction of scientific method: rationality upholds a psychological paradigm that awards knowledge-production to thought, ahead of any involvement in language. This trap is named 'absolute knowledge' by Derrida (2011), and a 'regime of truth' by Foucault (1980).⁴

Understanding that science is linguistic invention is to understand its limitation. science enables us to suppose that things are happening. It does not tell us what things are. Nor is science immune from the values of its theorists' relation to, and position in, a particular society. (Popkewitz, 1984, p. 194)

Not everyone who fashions him or herself as a postmodern thinker in educational debate has warmed to, or even absorbed the theoretical and practical repercussions of this critique of the identity principle. When Popkewitz says that science does not tell us what things are, he is confirming that there is a fundamental discontinuity between a fact and the meaning of the fact (Descombes, 1979, pp. 140, 141).

The case in hand is the indication that there is a classroom, and the expression that it is a relic of the industrial revolution. Nair *indicates* (fact): this is a reference to a thing (in the world) that is indifferent to consciousness; indications reduce an idea to an empirical event. But when Nair expresses himself, he is privileging his own thought, his own apprehension of the classroom (as discussed earlier). The term 'expression' is already a reference to an interiority aiming to externalise thought: 'expression imprints in a certain outside a sense which is discovered first in a certain inside' (Derrida, 2011, p. 27). so we must separate wanting to say something (expression), in rhetorical terms, from indication: this is especially so because Derrida is responding critically to the assumption that the intention to say something (whether it is said internally, in imaginary terms, or not) earns a privilege it doesn't deserve.

As soon as we admit that discourse belongs essentially to the order of representation, the distinction between 'actual' discourse and discursive representation becomes suspect, whether the discourse is purely 'expressive' or engaged in 'communication'. By reason of the originally repetitive structure of the sign in general, there is every chance for 'actual' language to be as imaginary as imaginary discourse and for imaginary discourse to be as actual as actual discourse. (Derrida, 2011, p. 43)

The 'originarily repetitive structure of the sign in general' is a shorthand way of saying that all words must be codified socially in order for them to be signs at all, for them to be deployed in language and to hold individual meanings. Fact and expression are separated because if they were collapsed together, there would be no means of distinguishing the particularity of moral values from the superposed generality of facts in the empirical universe. So when Popkewitz warns us that science can only enable us to suppose that 'things are happening', he is naming the empirical habitus typical of scientific prose. But then he warns us more explicitly still, that science 'does not tell us what things are'. This is an explicitly ontological critique: it avoids placing us all on the same historical horizon; it avoids the trap of dropping a critique of sense-experience in favour of a historicism that returns us all to a rationality, in which reality is something we all share, and in which our thoughts are uniquely internal to ourselves.

The sameness of the classroom

So the rationality, the ideology, of the classroom stems from the empiricism that demands that we must all agree upon the sameness of the classroom. The empirical sameness of this classroom does not pertain to the similarity of its physical attributes; rather it is derived from the particularity of a

discourse that seeks 'to pass itself off as universal or absolute' (Descombes, 1979, p. 137). Prakash Nair is an instance of this empiricism, this rationality: his conception of the classroom works by pretending that the reliquary, industrial classroom is superseded. Once it has been superseded, there is no need to re-present it. The new classroom that Nair claims to have invented erases the old classroom.

The trick Nair achieves here is in maintaining an absent presence for a place of rationality, a physicality that is non-physical, where authentic education can always occur. In that place of rationality, which is always an idealised place, the site of education becomes something to be referred to, through the use of signs like 'educational facility'. But of course, this is mere displacement of 'classroom'. Sameness can be obtainable as long as you refer to it with a signifier, since the sign has an 'originarily repetitive structure'.

Essentially, the site of education is dis-placed—which is another way of saying that it no longer *has* a place, no longer *needs* a (physical) place. The place is now an interiority (when I imagine it, I'm imagining the real thing) that does not need to express its own identity (I know what it looks like without needing to visit it). Only those who are outside the place of education have need of the sign, so as to repetitively gesture toward it (Derrida, 2011, p. 45). I refer to this idealised place of education as the 'scene of the classroom', for the sake of shorthanding my critique of that imaginary horizon on which 'all of us' share a rational perspective of the purpose of education.

Nair wants us to think 'we' (all of us who are already inside our own place of rationality) can improve on the industrial classroom; he addresses 'us' in a prose that enables the convergence of industrial classroom (an expression) with a fictional place or scene that is more or less factual, outside, indifferent to my image of it, and which we must use the sign to gesture toward.

But the sense of improvement he conveys is a reference to the world-future; it refers to a necessarily fictional place, a temporality that is yet to 'be'. The potential improvement he promises is, by definition, a reference to the exteriority that doesn't yet exist, and so we are forced to wait for it. It is not incidental to Nair's message about how to improve upon an industrial classroom, that the potential improvement is identifiable with Prakash Nair. The classroom is cast into memory by virtue of a signifier of the future: but, not by chance, this future is a future that is *also* a self-representation of Prakash Nair! By virtue of an erasure of the classroom, by breaking it off from any predication of rationality upon the classroom having a future, we arrive at a logic that asserts that Prakash Nair is holding out the future as an exteriority, one that is itself dis-placed by Prakash Nair. The successful erasure of the classroom operates through the repetitive presentation of Prakash Nair as a presence that consistently repeats itself ad infinitum.

Ironically this also means that Prakash Nair (a factual, tangible, physical individual) is dis-placed by Prakash Nair (an expression, a signifier, referring to a being-fact, whose self-presence is sustained by constant reiteration *in the signifier*). So Prakash Nair is two kinds of presence, a fact and also a fiction, necessary to the possibility of a future-for-education. Prakash Nair is making us wait. He has placed 'us' into a more or less permanent horizon of anticipation. Because 'Prakash Nair' is essentially an expression, produced for the sake of giving meaning to a fact, signifying a signified, then Prakash Nair is a double, a repetition, and only exists as a referral to a sign. 'Prakash Nair' earns a spectral, ghostly, fictive status. 'The *I am*, being experientially lived'

only as an *I am present*, presupposes in itself the relation to presence in general, to being as a presence. The appearing of the *I* to itself in the *I am* is therefore originarily the relation to its own possible disappearance. (Derrida, 2011, p. 46)

The apprehension of Prakash Nair is not the same as the appearance of Prakash Nair, anymore than I see myself in the precise same way that others see me. This may have genuine implications for the way we interpret Nair's claim that the classroom is obsolete.

Conclusion: Promises and prophecies

The rhetorical status of Nair's assertion that the 'classroom is obsolete' should prove to be deeply problematic for Nair himself, given that, by taking up such a rhetorical position, he places himself within the very structure that he is asserting is obsolete. For in the nature of a rhetorical assertion, in the possibility of making an indication of fact, we should recognise the kind of rationality Nair imputes to the educational-world. Knowingly, or unknowingly, Nair imputes a rationality to that horizon of imaginary readers and listeners that receive his proclamation: this is a necessary imputation that says 'those who hear me will have the function of understanding me'.

I hasten to add that there is more than one possible trajectory for this kind of rhetoric, and it may not always involve straightforward comprehension. Prophecy is the kind of rhetoric that involves seeing into the future and making predictions. In fact, the notion of prophecy derives from ancient Greek language that referred to a form of public speech: '*prophetes* is a *nomen agentis* of the verbal stem φην, "to say" or "to speak" and therefore is "one who proclaims publicly"' (Maurizio, 1995, p. 70). Apocalyptic rhetoric as Nair appears to be using it is, in itself, a reference to the special knowledge reserved for a divinity.

It is precisely when Rationality became a means of displacing divine knowledge, during the Enlightenment, that, in the view of Jacques Derrida, Western ideas of thought and consciousness led to the historical belief that humanity had reached its zenith, an end, of sorts.⁵

But this rationality is actually a point of *closure* for Jacques Derrida, which explains why it invokes so much talk of the end of history. It can form a closure because the rhetorical form denotes certainty, absolute-ness. From Derrida's perspective, such a moment of the absolute disrupts the becoming of humanity.

The next problem that is opened by questioning the rationality of the classroom is about the certainty at the heart of *pedagogical* rhetoric, if it is regarded as a form of public speech in the same way that prophecy once was. While there isn't the opportunity in this discussion to fully address all possible directions for the meaning of pedagogy, I am posing the image of Nair's own self-certainty as analogous to pedagogy. That self-certainty is necessarily manifest in his rhetorical stance; is the same self-certainty not also typical of pedagogical rhetoric? When such rhetoric is directed *at* educators, it offers them a reflection of themselves, a model by which to analyse that same stance when it is adopted *by* educators.

While it may be so that Nair has successfully persuaded some people (some of those educators to whom his ideas are directed) that the classroom is really obsolete, it is not yet obvious how we should connect the nature of a physical space (the classroom) with the intellectual structure that it might induce. Nair has failed to provide a convincing argument for why post-industrial education is structurally different from industrial education. As long ago as 1963, the educational philosopher Harry Broudy suggested that it is only

once a society becomes self-conscious about schooling its young, the seed of educational theory is sown, and if all goes well, educational practice in time ceases to be blindly empirical and guides its footsteps by the insights of theory. (Broudy, 1963, p. 1)

I borrow this passage to ask whether Prakash Nair assumes the ongoing salience of a particular approach to educational theory. If Broudy is correct, Nair will reflect a theory of education generated by the need for a society to shape the young and lead the community toward anticipated goals. To dis-cover what Nair has said that might express such goals, I note that, in his 2011 discussion, he mentions several criteria for a better education than that offered by the classroom, including

personalized; (2) safe and secure; (3) inquiry-based; (4) student-directed; (5) collaborative; (6) interdisciplinary; (7) rigorous and hands-on; (8) embodying a culture of excellence and high expectations; (9) environmentally conscious; (10) offering strong connections to the local community and business; (11) globally networked; and (12) setting the stage for lifelong learning. (Nair, 2011)

Both ‘personalised’ and ‘student-directed’ suggest to me that Nair has absorbed prevailing theory, known as the ‘child-centred pedagogy’, which writers like Valerie Walkerdine (1984) have traced to Rousseau (Baker, 2001) Kant (Jardine, 1992) and Dewey (Osberg, Biesta, & Cilliers, 2008). This absorption of child-centred pedagogy is not unusual in itself: but does Nair comprehend that the child-centred pedagogy merely describes the teaching methods that typify the same classroom he is so sure is now obsolete? Again, when we compare Nair’s criteria to values that have been applied at least since Roman antiquity, we notice that, as they *are stated*, educational goals have remained remarkably constant.

The immediate goal of pedagogy has been to incorporate the results of instruction into habits of speaking, thinking, acting and feeling with the hope that they would function reliably in adult life. (Broudy, 1963, p. 4)

Numerous educational writers have offered analyses of how such ‘goals’ have been determined historically, including such eminent sociologists as Bowles (1972), Bourdieu (1973) and hunter (1994). There is little to make us suspect that the structural functions of a school have suddenly, drastically altered, at the turn into the twenty-first century, to warrant the redundancy of existing classroom practices. How, therefore, should we interpret the apparent tendency to conflate the classroom as an architectural space with the pedagogical goals that owe their logic to the Western idea?

In short, the practical justification of pedagogy is the promise of transfer. discerning the logical connection between what is taught and its future use, and the method that actually establishes the connection, constitutes pedagogy’s theoretical justification. (Broudy, 1963, p. 4)

I have persisted with my reference to Harry Broudy because I think there is merit in the succinctness with which he names the ‘promise of transfer’ as the core justification for pedagogy. The advantage lies in recognising that promises and prophecies have something in common—an inherent temporality, a sense of anticipation of a future that is always out of reach, but nevertheless being lived at every moment.

Teachers make a promise—to the community, to parents, to students—to transfer, inculcate, and reproduce knowledge and skills. But this interests me here, in my analysis of Prakash Nair, because it resonates so loudly with respect to the rhetoric of a better educational future. Nair positions himself as someone making a promise to the community that if his school design were adopted universally, all education would be better than all education that preceded it.

In noting the temporality inherent within promises and prophecies more generally, I return to the problems raised by the rhetorical structure of Nair’s remarks. It seems to me that this structure owes itself to what Derrida calls the ‘vocation of infinity’. Prakash Nair regards himself as fully present, an absolute, certain presence that he can apprehend, for himself, in a consciousness of himself, the taking of himself as an object, that he recognises by the name ‘Prakash Nair’ (as I discussed earlier). When he writes the sentence ‘the classroom is obsolete’, he has already heard himself say this sentence internally. Writing it down is the accomplishment of a desire to hear himself, i.e. to hear the speech of Prakash Nair. He is addressing himself, first and foremost.

This raises two questions: the first is about whether educational philosophy should better accommodate the implications of rhetorical forms, for analysing pedagogy and teaching practice, let alone the interactions between teachers and students? The second is to use this analysis of Nair as a preliminary model for how to commence that discussion of pedagogical rhetoric. If we consider the likelihood that Nair regards himself, knowingly or not, as an infinity, an ongoing site for the reception of his own thoughts—what does this mean for the teacher more generally? Does the idealised teacher also owe the structure of his or her speech to the absolute, infinite character of that declamatory rhetoric? And does that rhetoric provide a clue: does it express the closure of thought, the end of any subsequent development of rational discourse, a disruption to the becoming, changing character of educational time?

Notes

1. By comparison to educational research, scholars in the field of literary theory, aesthetics and cultural studies are more accustomed to thinking about the significance of architecture for expressions of political and economic formations cf. Jameson (1991, 1998).
2. Fielding Nair International (2005) and Nair (2011).
3. 'These initiatives would not necessarily get rid of classrooms, but instead redesign and refurbish them to operate as "learning studios" and "learning suites" alongside common areas reclaimed from hallways that vastly expand available space and allow better teaching and learning' Nair (2011).
4. Michael Peters offers a helpful discussion of the shift in Foucault's language with respect to the 'regime of truth' cf. Peters (2004).
5. Derrida is, of course, drawing on the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger in taking up this view of the Enlightenment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Chris Peers is senior lecturer in education at the Faculty of Education, Monash university. Chris' research is focused on philosophical analysis of educational concepts. Most recently Chris published a book about the concept of 'class size', and he is currently working on his second doctorate which addresses the history of Western conceptions of the family. he has also written about the way in which economic concepts of human capital have impacted on educational practice. Chris is also undertaking a study of the aesthetic concepts of representation and sublimation with a focus on the Australian artist Juan davila.

References

- Baker, B. (2001). *In perpetual motion: Theories of power, educational history and the child*. New York, Ny: Peter lang.
- Bloom, A. (1989). Responses to Fukuyama. *The National Interest*, 16, 19–21.
- Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, education and cultural change* (pp. 71–112). London: Tavistock.
- Bowles, s. (1972). schooling and inequality from generation to generation. *Journal of Political Economy*, 80 (3, part 2) s219–s251.
- Brantlinger, P. (1998). Apocalypse 2001; or, what happens after posthistory? *Cultural Critique*, 39, 59–83.
- Broudy, h. (1963). Historic exemplars of teaching method. Ch 1 in N. Gage (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 1–43) Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Derrida, J. (1989). *Edmund Husserl's origin of geometry*. An Introduction. (J. Leavey, Trans.). Lincoln: university of Nebraska Press.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). New York, Ny: Routledge.
- Derrida, J. (2011). *Voice and Phenomenon*. (L. Lawlor, Trans.). Evanston, Il: Northwestern university Press.
- Descombes, V. (1979). *Modern French Philosophy*. (L. Scott-Fox & M. J. Harding, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fielding Nair International. (2005). Educational facilities effectiveness instrument. Retrieved from www.goodschooldesign.com
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977*. (C. Gordon, Ed.). London: harvester.
- Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of history? *The National Interest*, 16, 3–18.
- Hunter, I. (1994). *Rethinking the school. Subjectivity, bureaucracy, criticism*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Jameson, F. (Ed.) (1991). spatial equivalents in the world system. Ch 4 in *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism* (pp. 97–129) Durham, NC: duke university Press.

- Jameson, F. (Ed.) (1998). Postmodernism and consumer society. Ch 1 in *The Cultural Turn. Selected writings on the postmodern 1983–98* (pp. 1–20). London: Verso.
- Jardine, D. (1992). Immanuel Kant, Jean Piaget and the rage for order: Ecological hints of the colonial spirit in pedagogy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 24, 28–43.
- Lawlor, I. (2011). Translators introduction: The germinal structure of Derrida's thought. In J. Derrida (Ed.), *Voice and phenomenon* (pp. xi–xxviii). Evanston, IL: Northwestern university Press.
- Maurizio, I. (1995). Anthropology and spirit possession: A reconsideration of the pythia's role at Delphi. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 115, 69–86.
- Nair, P. (2011, July 29). The classroom is obsolete: It's time for something new. *Education Week*. Bethesda, Md: Editorial Projects in Education.
- Osberg, d., Biesta, G., & Cilliers, P. (2008). From representation to emergence: Complexity's challenge to the epistemology of schooling. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40, 213–227.
- Peters, M. (2004). Educational research: "games of truth" and educational subjectivity. *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, 5, 50–63.
- Popkewitz, T. (1984). *Paradigm and ideology in educational research*. London: Falmer.
- Walkerine, V. (1984). developmental psychology and the child-centred pedagogy: The insertion of Piaget into early education. Ch 4 in J. Henriques, W. Hollway, C. Urwin, C. Venn, & V. Walkerine (Eds.), *Changing the subject: Psychology, social regulation and subjectivity* (pp. 153–202). London: Methuen.