

**Writing unbound:  
Bridging text and context in the history of education<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on the problem of resolving narrative and post-structuralist forms of historical writing. In particular, it explores the gap between three phenomena: (1) a text as an historical source; (2) a text as the shared meanings that constitute a community of practice; and (3) a text as a piece of writing that relates the past to the present.

Research proceeds by making choices.  
(Donald E. Stokes, 1997, p. 6)

I sometimes describe myself as a 'Friday afternoon historian'. I recently discovered that Philippe Ariès, author of *L'enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960) described himself in a similar way - as 'a Sunday historian'. Ariès' comment, which appears in Peter Burke's *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (2001, p. 6), left me feeling that part-time historians may have an identity problem.

Two recent developments have deepened my feelings of uncertainty. First, widespread criticism has been made of Ariès claim that childhood did not become a distinct cultural category until the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Barbara Hanawalt has claimed, for instance, that Ariès made 'careless' and 'cavalier' use of historical sources and, in particular, 'misinterpreted medieval evidence' (Hanawalt, 2003, p. 22; see also Orme, 2001, pp. 4-5). Meanwhile, Nicholas Orme has responded to Ariès work by producing *Medieval Children* (2001), a volume devoted to the thesis that children were a 'prominent and well-recorded group of the population' in medieval England (p. 10). And, to complete the revisionist account of Ariès' ideas, Hanawalt has even asked whether 'a modern scholar of child development or of the modern idea of childhood need Ariès at all' (p. 41).

The second development that has troubled my historical investigations has been the deep divisions that have appeared in modern historical writing. These divisions take various forms, and can be explored in various ways. One prominent form is the division between a modernist discourse, sometimes associated with the name of Ranke, which emphasises the creation of

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texts that tell it like it was; and a post-structural or post-modernist discourse which claims the impossibility of creating such truthful texts.

The origins of this division can be traced to various sources. One recurrent influence has been the re-evaluation of language and meaning that has taken place throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the rise of the 'New' or 'Practical' criticism in the 1920s and 30s challenged the assumption that literary criticism – the practices of philology and belles lettres – should be restricted to the integrity of language and its texts. Criticism, that is, could extend to the analysis of the effects that texts had in different contexts. Further, this challenge fostered two developments: the word text began to be used as a metaphor for the combination of text and context; and these ideas about text and context were transferred from literary studies into social studies, media studies, historical studies, the analysis of technology in general (e.g. Grint & Woolgar, 1997) and educational - or instructional – technologies in particular (e.g. Lundgren, 1983).

One of Marshall McLuhan's biographers, Philip Marchand, neatly summarises these new developments:

No longer did one have to examine a poem in terms of what it had to *say*, or to examine a machine in terms of what it *did*....[Instead] one could examine a machine as a far-reaching arrangement produced in the lives of its users. One did not understand a photocopier by grasping that it reproduced documents. One began to understand it when one grasped the sum of its effects, which included the destruction of government secrecy (by making it easy to leak documents) and the conversion of writers into publishers. (1989, p. 42)

The meaning of a text, therefore, resides not in the structural roles played by its words, but in its unbounded context. Using assumptions drawn from the new criticism, texts can be studied not as the embodiment of truth but, from a post-structuralist standpoint, as sources of ambiguity and multiple interpretation. Not all historians, however, have been happy with this development. Keith Windshuttle, for instance, has complained that the cumulative effect of literary critics and social theorists had not only been damaging to the normal science of historical studies but, in the process, has also been 'murdering our (sic) past' (2000). The work of seekers after truth - 'old-style empiricists' as Windshuttle calls them (p. 3) - has been marginalised by the corrosive inter-penetration of language, context, representation and ideology.

The winds of change represented by the new criticism have even penetrated the citadels of historical studies. In the *American Historical Review*, for instance, Rebecca Spang suggested that, under the impact of post-structuralist thinking, historians have been left in an 'impossible position'. The emergence of a plurality of paradigms has fostered inter-paradigm 'paranoia'. If historians accept, she continues, that 'reality is completely shot through with ideology/discourse', they must also persist with the belief that there remains 'something else' that makes 'critique possible'. 'This must be an impossible position', Spang concludes, 'but it is the best we will achieve' (Spang, 2003, p. 147). I agree.

Any attempt to insulate the objectivism of truth-related narrative history from the interpretive stance of post-structuralist analysis is, I believe, misguided. A separation cannot be sustained because the view that reality is shot through with ideology *is* the critique. On the basis of this critique, all twentieth-century historians have been in an impossible position. Their relationship to the language of the past is always problematic. Their writings are not absolute truths. Rather, they are *representations* of the past whose 'truths' serve different purposes at different times and in different contexts. There is nothing else: all paradigms, that is, have their internal paranoia.

It is no surprise that, confronted with these problems, historians find it difficult to write anything at all. How, for instance, can the statement 'there is no truth' be judged to be true or false? And how (to use Derrida's post-modern maxim) can there be nothing outside the text, if there is no agreement over the boundaries of the text? The only way out for empiricist historians, it seems, is to become victims of *reductio ad absurdum* - to write, like Spang, about why they cannot write.

### Refashioning a text

In the remainder of this paper I would like to apply this argument to my own historical research into the beginnings of modern schooling. My problem has been to create a text that can stand as an authoritative communication between writer and reader. The focus of this work has not been a wish to understand the past but, ultimately, to understand what I do as a teacher. What, for instance, do words like class and curriculum 'produce' in me as a teacher?

To explore this question, I chose to investigate the origins of words, like class and curriculum, that shape educational practice. After publishing *Towards a Theory of Schooling* (1989), which includes a discussion of the sixteenth-century origins of class and curriculum, I gradually extended my interpretive horizon to see these pedagogic innovations in a new light. They not only marked shifts in educational practice, their appearance also signified a more extensive shift in educational thought that took place between 1500 and 1650. The following text summarises this shift:

Key educational word	Origins
Syllabus	Circa 1500
Class	1519
Catechism (question and answer form)	Circa 1540
Curriculum	1573
Subject	Late 1500s
Didaktik	1613

My general thesis, which I have drawn from this table, is that the co-appearance of these concepts marked the beginnings of modern schooling<sup>2</sup>. Their eventual adoption is marked by the title and content of Comenius' *Didactica magna*. Produced in the middle of the 1600s, it claimed - on its title page - to hold the key to teaching all things to all people. In McLuhan's terms, then, what 'far-reaching' changes did this hegemonic innovation - which I sometimes label as the instructional turn - produce in the lives of its users?

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<sup>2</sup> With regard to Sweden, the following citation resonates with my general argument about the second half of the 1500s: 'Sveriges' första skolordning tillkom under Johan III:s tid och utgjorde ett avsnitt in 1571 års skolordning. Den ledde inte till några betydande förändringar, då den stort sett innebär ett kodifierande av gällande praxis på skolans område, men framstår ändå som en viktig milstolpe i det svenska skolväsendets utveckling i och med att en viss likformighet ifråga om skolorganisation och kursplaner fastslogs i en kunglig förordning' G. Richardson, *Svensk Utbildningshistoria* (6:e upplagan), Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1999, s. 22-3.

How, then, could I interpret the sixteenth century texts that featured these terms? I gradually realised that to understand the beginnings of modern schooling I had to go beyond the written texts that had originated such key educational concepts. In short, I had to study such texts in the context of their communities of practice. In doing so, I have borrowed heavily from Stanley Fish's writings on text and context.

An historical text is not merely a closed 'succession of words' (Fish, 1980, p. 3) but includes the community of practice - Fish called it an *interpretive* community - that engages with the received wisdom, disputes and values represented in the written text. In effect, the text *is* the community of practice - the teachers, students, publishers, type-setters, printers, proof-readers, booksellers and readers (etc.) whose social existence is bound up with such written texts. Such extended texts, therefore, are always open texts. There are many complementary ways, that is, to represent the productive capacity of a text.

To understand how a text works, therefore, it is necessary to understand how an interpretive community works. It creates new meanings, as in the case of class and curriculum; it adopts these meanings to sustain particular forms of life - in this case modern schooling; and, not least, it uses these meanings to write new texts (e.g. Comenius' *Didactica magna*).

Fish clearly identifies the open-ness of such texts:

It is the interpretive communities rather than either the text or the reader, that produces meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. (Fish, 1980, p. 14)

Fish's argument about the open-ness of texts helps to address a aspect of my research that previously, had troubled me. 'How is it possible', curious listeners and readers ask, 'to infer educational practice from written texts?'. Such scepticism is justified. Written texts may, indeed, propose new practices; but unless communities of practice are implicated in the written texts, their take-up of these proposed practices is minimal. Sometimes, of course, new ideas and their associated practices engage with an existing community of practice which takes up the original ideas and re-constitutes itself around these ideas. Moreover, as these ideas are reworked, their meanings are also open to change. Thus, in the hands of an interpretive community, practice always has a transformative potential.

In coming to this general argument about the relation between texts and practice, I have amplified the table of key ideas shown above. I have studied the emergence of specific terms (e.g. class and curriculum, see Hamilton, 1989); I have defended the idea of an 'instructional turn' that took place in the 1500s (Hamilton, 2000); I have attempted a definition of the beginnings of modern schooling (Hamilton, 2001); I have tried to see how different terms can be linked historically and well as semantically (e.g. syllabus and curriculum, see Hamilton, 2002); and I have explored how the language arts of the *trivium* were gradually transformed, by a new community of practice, into the instructional methods of the Renaissance and Reformation (Hamilton, 2003a).

### **Writing an Unfinished Text**

All the communities and meanings discussed in these papers existed in the historical past. So what have I done by writing about them? I have seen my task as interpretive: the translation of texts from the past into texts for the present. Further, I have tried to ensure that my articles have a double resonance. To be an authoritative act of communication, they must resonate with the original text and, no less important, resonate with the meanings shared by members

of the author's own community of practice. But, as noted, texts about education that are produced by historians may not find a readership - because their content and form does not connect with an educational community of practice. Thus, writing a text also means engaging with a community of practice, a context.

As a part-time historian, however, I have problems with feeding off one community of practice (historians) while writing for educationists. I am well aware that I cannot engage with everything written *in* or *on* the period between 1500 and 1650. I have used merely a sub-sample of sources. There are deficiencies, therefore, in my profile of assembled data; just as these deficiencies shape my writings about these data. To compensate for these deficiencies, and to enhance the narrative flow of my writings, I use rhetorical and other literary devices. Like Cicero and his educational followers of the sixteenth century, I believe that texts should be written to move and please, as well as to inform. Even if my writings may appear to have a beginning, a middle and an end, these may merely be language devices - compensatory rhetoric that masks an incomplete argument.

There is another sense in which my text is unfinished. There are several loose threads in the text. I would like, for example, to give more attention to the notion of a curriculum 'subject'. I would like to investigate the transformation of catechism from a system of questioning (before about 1540) to an instructional system of questioning and answering. And, not least, I am very conscious that much of what I have written takes no account of a parallel instructional development in the second half of the sixteenth century - the creation of the Jesuit's *Ratio studiorum* (scheme of studies).

By the same token, however, there are certain threads that I will not try to weave into my text. I have decided, for instance, not to devote an essay to Comenius' community of practice, because the same ground will be covered in Howard Hotson's follow-up volume to *Johan Heinrich Alsted 1588-1638: Between Renaissance, Reformation and universal reform* (Hotson, 2000).

### **Achieving Closure**

When, then, can I stop writing? This is an eternal problem for writers. But the problem of closure may, in fact, be illusory. It is only a problem in a community of practice - of 'old-style empiricists, perhaps - whose members are driven by the image of the finished book or monograph. By abandoning that illusion, however, I can stop worrying. Why? Because scientific texts, like the workings of a community of practice, are never finished - just discontinued.

As suggested earlier, my investigations into the beginnings of modern schooling are bounded and, therefore, limited. I am always aware that there is something beyond the primary and secondary sources that I have examined. Secondly, my texts are always unbound because they are internally problematic. There are always loose ends - internal inconsistencies, ambiguous inferences and ill-defined terms - that resist closure.

For instance, I wrote 'The instructional turn (constructing an argument)' (2000) for a departmental seminar. I finished it for the seminar; but I did not feel it was good enough to post on my own departmental web-site, as I usually do with 'grey' papers. I felt its text had the same problem that critics have raised with Ariès work: was there, in fact, a *turn*? Is it reasonable to describe, as a 'turn', something that happened over a period of 150 years? And when does a turn become a revolution? Could I - or should I - I soften my claim by using 'prolonged turn'? Or would this oxymoron be another self-defeating rhetorical flourish.

Aware of these problems, I complemented the original 'turn' claim with two papers that re-examined my original text through a more extended analysis of the transformation process

('From dialectic to didactic', 2002; and 'Instruction in the making', 2003). Nevertheless, having sent 'The instructional turn (constructing an argument)' to a member of the Textbook Colloquium (i.e. a community of practice), I was asked if it could be posted on the Colloquium's website (<http://faculty.ed.uiuc.edu/westbury/textcol/>). It still does not appear on my personal research site.

### **Publishing an Unfinished Text**

For these reasons, I am following three publishing strategies. The first strategy - *looseleaf* - is to deposit the papers in data archives (e.g. [www.eduline.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.eduline.leeds.ac.uk) and [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)). My second strategy has been inspired by the Swedish notion of a doctoral thesis that takes the form of a *sammanläggning*. I cannot think of a one-word English equivalent, but the Swedish word carries the connotation of gathering together in a structured form. Formally, a doctoral thesis that takes the *sammanläggning* form comprises a collection of published papers. Informally, however, what counts as 'published' (or finished) is a fluid category. In practice, *sammanläggning* has become a middle way between a monograph and a collection of finished papers. It is better regarded, therefore, as a series of *progress* papers linked with the aid of what is known, in Swedish, as a *kappa* (for further discussion, see Hamilton, forthcoming).

I think about my text on the beginnings of modern schooling in a similar way. It, too, can be regarded as a series of progress papers. But what about the *kappa*? Conventionally, this Swedish word is translated as *coat*; but it can also mean curtain *pelmet* or the *valance* around a piece of furniture. I have started to use a combination of these meanings by writing introductory and concluding essays (as coat); and separate introductions to each working paper (as pelmet or valance). By adopting this dual form, I can combine writing about my research programme in its totality with writing about how each essay took shape. My aim is to keep the working papers in the same form - and with the same imperfections - as the original versions (e.g. conference papers). At the same time, I will use the *kappa* to reflect upon my earlier efforts. To this extent, the final product will not only be a discussion of the beginnings of modern schooling but also a text about doing research. Either way, it will be a text that others can extend according to their own interests and values.

My third publishing strategy is a last resort. I would rework everything into the form of a book that could be bound. This strategy is unlikely to be adopted since it would be an admission of failure. It would entail rewriting everything according to the values of the 'tell it like it was' community of practice. My goal has been more modest, to write a contribution to *a*, not *the*, history of modern schooling.

### **Publishing an educational text**

Much of this paper has been given to problems associated with *writing* a text that resonates with a community of practice. My assumption is that I am writing an educational rather than an historical text. My audience, therefore, is a community of practice that appreciates the practice-related significance of my original concern about words like class and curriculum. Moreover, this community of practitioners includes, but is not limited to educationists who, in their turn, may be interested in writing a text related to their own historical research. I have persevered with this perspective because the educational questions raised by my original text have been neglected by both historians and educationists, albeit with a few exceptions like Ong (1958) and Grafton & Jardine (1986).

Throughout, my work is driven by a conviction that a neglected chapter of the European educational record - as represented by my table of 'key educational words' - can be located, examined, appreciated and re-presented to educationists. Further, my writing is steered not so much by the question 'are my arguments *true*?' but, rather, 'are they *defensible*?' When I am

challenged, that is, will I be able to offer an argument that wins the respect, if not the agreement, of my opponent.

As noted, I originally began thinking about these questions as they related to my own teaching. I became interested in the period 1500-1650 because of its links with today - the twenty-first century. I link these two sets of questions - what am I doing? And what was happening in the sixteenth century? - through the claim that my research focuses on the origins of *modern* schooling. Although the word 'modern' has its ambiguities - in its relationship, for example, to 'post-modern' - my use has an analogy in David Tyack and Larry Cuban's discussion of the *grammar* of schooling. Whereas Tyack and Cuban's text focuses on the persistence of the grammar of schooling, my historical interests have focused on its origins. Forms of teaching that, in English, can be characterised as 'instruction' originated in the sixteenth century and remained dominant until at least the end of the twentieth century - when Tyack and Cuban published *Tinkering towards Utopia: A century of public school reform* (1995).

But, assuming that all pedagogic practices are historically located, my work, like Tyack and Cuban's, raises another question. Does the text of modern schooling mask an emergent grammar of postmodern schooling? Echoing McLuhan's sharp if determinist language, how will the grammar of post-modernist schooling be 'produced' by the far-reaching changes modelled and, perhaps, sustained by an alternative community of practice - members of the internet generation whose alienation from the grammar of modernist schooling has been scrutinised and reported, in different ways, by Doll & Gough (2003) and Sørensen (forthcoming).

It is for all these reasons that my text is educational. It is hand-woven around educational question which, I believe, have relevance both to the past and the present. But a question still remains: who will read it?

### **Defining the Reader?**

When pondering questions about the readership of texts, the problem is not to worry about what the text *says* but, initially, about what it *does*. How does it relate to different communities of practice? If I put it on the internet, how is it remodelled by the meanings imposed by internet software and its authors? If I publish it as a series of working papers, how will the finished result be shaped by the interventions of publishers, editors, copy editors, designers, librarians, bookshop managers, reviewers and other intermediaries? Indeed, much academic publishing is directed not towards readers but, instead, towards a community of practice steered by university librarians. In practice, therefore, the author's definition of the text is not enough. Meanings that writers generate within their own community of practice may not correspond to the community of practice of potential readers.

The works of Shakespeare are a classic case where an unrecognised community of practice mediated the eventual reading of the original texts. No manuscript of the plays survives - except perhaps three pages from an unperformed work; and Shakespeare took no part in the preparation of the published versions. For him, Darnton suggests (2003, p. 43), 'the performance was what counted, and he probably modified the scripts as the action evolved on the stage'. Thus:

to make sense of Shakespeare...it is not enough to be a literary critic. One must also be a bibliographer - or at least understand enough of bibliography to know how books came into being in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

'Bibliographic analysis', Darnton elaborates, can be applied to 'any kind of text and any form of communication'. Moreover, 'by learning how texts became embedded in paper as

typographical signs and transmitted to readers as pages bound in books', bibliographers hope 'to understand a fundamental aspect of literature itself' - the relation between text and context. Other well-documented examples of the same phenomenon - how texts 'came into being' through the mediation of community of practice unrelated to scientific writing - relate to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (see Johns, 1998, pp. 633-635), and most of Marshall McLuhan's later works (see Marchand, *passim*).

The mutual constitution of authors and readers is a controversial question. My own judgement is that there is, indeed, mutual influence. As producers and consumers, authors and readers have powers of agency. If they are members of a shared community of practice, these powers of agency revolve around the same interpretive strategies. Authors and readers have a respect for each other. They mutually author the resultant text and, at the same time, their collaboration evokes new texts, new communities of practice.

### **Unfinished Business (by way of a conclusion)**

The preparation of this paper was triggered by current proposals to establish a Swedish research school in educational history. The proposal envisaged the admission of annual cohorts of research students who would be attached, variously, to departments of education and history, yet who would take courses in common. As I read drafts of the proposal, I began to wonder how the core courses of the school would focus on the differences between the conception of a text attributed to Ranke and the conceptions of a text outlined by literary theorists such as Fish or McLuhan. Equally, I wondered how the school might explore the identity, legitimacy and praxis of part-time (or cross-disciplinary) historians. Would there be sufficient common ground for doctoral students to meet and share written representations of their practice? In turn, I was also encouraged - as a possible tutor for the research school - to reflect how these questions affect my own research, writing, teaching and supervision.

These are not new questions. But they have come to prominence with respect to all hybrid research schools. Central to the work of universities and their research schools is the creation and communication of valid and authoritative texts that, simultaneously, are also open and unfinished texts. In this paper, I have focused on my own text-related problems - as a hybrid, part-time researcher. What does it mean, in practice, to struggle with the problems of education and the problems of history? And what counts as the resolution of these problems? In short, what, how and why do I write? And for whom?

Insofar as these issues are faced by all hybrid researchers, whether they be historians or students of education, full-time or part-time, my attempt to resolve them may, perhaps, resonate with a community of practice that extends beyond my own work.

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