Tip off from Flyvbjerg: the Titanic task of phronetic research in the early professional learning of teachers

Peter Cope, Peter Gray and John I’Anson (University of Stirling)

Abstract

In this article, the authors look critically at the phronetic mode of social research, as advocated by Flyvbjerg (2001), in the context of a project which explores the early professional learning of teachers. Current models of teacher development, or "becoming professional", rely either on competence-based models or on expert judgments, without taking into account the complex web of social, cultural and material influences on the development process (McNally 2003). Additionally, current stories about the becoming teacher appear to have little to say about their ethical development. As the current study, from which this paper is derived, has found, there are strong ethical dimensions to this process, which may be characterised, over-simply, as a progression from idealism to pragmatism, from revolutionary fervour to behaviour management or, in some cases, from swimming to sinking. Rather than forming a separate and incommensurable dimension of the process, Flyvbjerg work suggests that the task of social research is to reveal the power structures which inevitably lie below the surface of all relational processes.

Flyvbjerg's (2001) work thus has relevance to the ethical and contextual dimensions of social science methodology, but the particular concern of this paper is to examine whether Flyvbjerg's reliance on the Dreyfus (1988) model of skills development is problematic, given that there have been a number of recent critiques of that model, ranging from the philosophical (Searle 2000) through to the empirical (Eraut 2001, Boreham 2004). The essence of this critique is that there is no theoretical or philosophical justification for Dreyfus' claim that there is a qualitative disjunction between the 'competent' and 'proficient' or 'expert' levels of task performance. Thus, the 'practical wisdom' which Flyvbjerg sees as being at the heart of the research process is itself theoretically suspect.

The paper explores these critiques, assesses their effects on Flyvbjerg's argument, and discusses how a modified version of Flyvbjerg's 'phronetic research' methodology might be applied to the early professional development research currently being conducted by the Institute of Education team at the University of Stirling under the auspices of the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Using the narratives of new and experienced teachers in school settings, the paper attempts to show that there is a complex and
unpredictable ethics of power which mediates the process of becoming an expert teacher. Thus, rather than dividing the research process into watertight analytical compartments, thereby inducing a false sense of security, the phronetic method embraces, and makes good use of, the collision between the ship of competencies and the iceberg of practical wisdom.

Introduction

The title of the article refers to the ‘Titanic’ task of educational research, and the use of this metaphor is intended to convey several things. Firstly, educational research is suffering from a conflict on the bridge, between its hardy seafaring crew, who have kept it afloat for so long, and its impatient owners, who are calling for more steam as the vessel seems to be lagging behind its (academic) competitors. Secondly, the passengers are highly stratified, with those in first class in daily touch with the owners, whilst those in steerage are likely to come off worse in the event of a catastrophe. Finally, the compartmentalisation of research, which is supposed to prevent those aboard from coming into contact with the ocean of everyday life, is not as watertight as it is supposed to be. And so on.

Flyvbjerg’s (2001) *Making Social Science Matter* is highly relevant to educational research, because of all the social sciences, it is arguably both the most context dependent and the most under threat from those who, for a variety of reasons, feel that it should be moving towards a ‘medical model’ of systematic review, meta-analysis and Random Controlled Trials. Whilst there have been numerous attempts to resist the imposition of natural science paradigms from within the educational research community (e.g., ) the arrival of a lifeboat from another disciplinary area is most welcome, not least because Flyvbjerg’s stature as a researcher is considerable and his writing is clear and concise. The core of his argument is that social science research is and must always be context dependent, and that therefore the case study and related methods ought to be given more weight than the current climate might suggest.

This is not in itself a new argument, but Flyvbjerg’s strength lies in introducing the concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom, a concept which he contrasts with those of scientific knowledge (episteme) and technical know-how (techne).

This article takes a critical look at the nature of his project. It is argued that part of the appeal is the narrative that Flyvbjerg constructs – but that this amounts to a ‘smooth overview’ that glosses over significant issues. In turn, this raises the question as to whether phronesis actually adds anything to the concern with postfoundational practices in poststructuralism

His prime source for this approach is the work of Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, and in particular their well-know model of skills development, the five-stage progression from novice to expert (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1988). At the core of the Dreyfus model is the idea of a qualitative transformation which takes place somewhere between levels, in which experts (or ‘virtuosI’) cease to follow rules and discriminate between, and respond to situations holistically, or as *gestalt*. In the area of work practices, a leading exponent of this model is Klein (1998). Klein argues that expert responses are in themselves predictive, in that a series of ‘what if...’ scenarios are deployed and reviewed, at a conscious or pre-conscious level in order to come to a decision in a specific case. (More on Klein….)

2
The majority of previous work done in this area has been in fields where decisions are made in response to critical, fast-moving events such as forest fires or basketball games. Weick (1995) has extended the model to situations of collective action, focusing on flight operations on board aircraft carriers as an example of collective ‘heedful awareness’ in which the combined expertise of a large number of individual actors is brought to bear on a situation. An orchestral musician describes this as a ‘sort of radar’ which co-ordinates action without it being represented in any way (Independent, 4/6/04).

Eraut (2001) problematises the Dreyfus model in two ways. Firstly, it is presented as an either/or alternative to ‘calculative rationality’, without allowing that there can be other modes of deliberation, analysis or consultation in order to come to practical decisions. The Dreyfus model neglects to address the sort of messy, real-world situations where decisions have to be made with (or in spite of) other people, with too few facts to go on or too many. Secondly, it sees expert performance as unproblematic, ‘an [idealized] process of learning from experience’ (2001:85), where experts rarely make mistakes. Nor, it seems, do they reflect on their learning in order to qualitatively transform what it is they are learning about. Bateson’s (1973) model of learning is useful here, and it can be crudely be summarised as:

level 1 – learning about
level 2 – learning to learn about
level 3 – learning what/how to learn to learn about…

None of the experts cited by Dreyfus transcends their world of expertise, in a level 3 insight, which would perhaps consist of questioning the need to fly fighter planes or play basketball, or to keep sailing at full speed….

Both these aspects of Eraut’s critique are applicable to the project under discussion here.

What is the problematic that Flyvbjerg’s book is addressing?

Flyvbjerg’s first chapter is titled: The Science Wars: a way out and concerns Sokal’s infamous spoof article in Social Text and the way this controversy might be read within the (supposed) continuing tension between the social and natural sciences (Sokal & Bricmont 1996).

In this book, I will present a way out of the Wars by developing a conception based on a contemporary interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, variously translated as prudence or practical wisdom. (Flyvbjerg 2001: 2)

Flyvbjerg further argues that: ‘

...phronesis is commonly involved in social practice, and that therefore attempts to reduce social science and theory to episteme or techne, or to comprehend them in those terms, are misguided.’ (p.2)

The goal is to help restore social science to its classical position as a practical, intellectual activity aimed at clarifying the problems, risks, and possibilities we face as humans and societies, and contributing to social and political praxis. (p.4)

What is his response?

Flyvbjerg argues that the war occurs because the two types of science tend to be compared in terms of their epistemic qualities and that this is misleading (p. 3)
'The two types of science have their respective strengths and weaknesses along fundamentally different dimensions.' Implicit appeal to incommensurability, characteristic of e.g. MacIntyre’s approach – (cf. Smith, 2003) significant that Foucault is here characterised as: ‘a main exponent of phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001:162)

‘Epistemic vocabularies have worked successfully in relation to their own intentions within particular domains in the natural sciences with no parallel in the social sciences.’ (F, 2001: 29)

Natural sciences are best at explanatory and predictive theory, which is important because the objects of enquiry - quarks, psychological constructs or icebergs – cannot explain themselves, or alter their intentions as a result of rhetorical strategies (p.32). Nor do they hold values within social networks, engage in reflexive analysis or exercise power. Flyvbjerg argues that phronesis has not previously included explicit considerations of power (even though Bernstein called for this.) and that ‘in modern society, conflict and power are phenomena constitutive of social and political inquiry… I will develop the classic concept of phronesis to include issues of power.’ He therefore calls for an assemblage of phronesis, power and case study methodology…

How has this been received? What are the difficulties with his approach?

For advocates of qualitative methodology Flyvbjerg’s project has immediate intuitive appeal, and has led to positive, if perhaps, uncritical reviews, as a strategy to resist the colonisation of educational research by methodologies that down play or exclude values and contextuality. This might be characterised as an assemblage of three components: phronesis and Foucault and case studies - the ‘and’ which acts as a kind of glue, has to do a lot of work.

Doel has written a paper on the conjunctive ‘and’ and the different types of work that it does. (1996: 424, 427) Thus in relation to the concept of phronesis, to quote from Doel:

‘the conjunctive “and” unfolds a space that holds onto, whilst hollowing out, that which it relates… It deconstructs the borders, boundaries, and limits which are projected between things’.

In other words by bringing together phronesis, Foucault and case studies Flyvbjerg is joining things that might otherwise be considered as separate, collapsing differences in order to focus on new connections that become possible. But Flyvbjerg mobilises ‘and’ in a way that simultaneously reinscribes other boundaries…

Fundamentally conservative in approach – talks about ‘restoring’ social science to its ‘classical position’ (p.4) equivalent to Toulmin’s remarks in Cosmopolis where he states that we can go back before modern difficulties began…

Toulmin’s response to this situation is itself Euro-centric in nature albeit through appeal to a critical reappropriation of past formulations. According to Toulmin, there is a need to ‘reappropriate the wisdom of the 16th century humanists, and develop a point of view that combines the abstract rigor and exactitude of the 17th –century “new philosophy” with a practical concern for human life in its concrete detail.
Only so [sic] can we counter the current widespread disillusion with the agenda of Modernity, and salvage what is still humanly important in its projects. (xi)

To this extent, as a strategy it appeals back to historical exemplars – or in this case particular concepts (such as phronesis) that have authority

Lash ….instead of accepting the presuppositions that determine the battle lines of today… [he] seek in another – and therefore inevitably earlier – cultural context the parameters for the vision they hope to express.’ (VH p. 63)

But in order to privilege ‘phronesis’ in this assemblage he can only mobilise Foucault in a limited way. It is not without significance that Foucault is here characterised as: ‘a main exponent of phronetic social science’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001:162) But F. can only be enrolled into this if we’re willing to exclude from view much of his writings that might pose some pretty awkward questions…
(rather like having a Bengali tiger on board your boat in Yann Martel’s ‘the life of Pi’: Foucault bites back)
(example of this – questioning of the truth effects produced by case studies)

Need to ask questions about the way F. sets up the debate – appears to be a clear demarcation between two competing camps, (one of which has greater power)
But are things quite as straightforward? Hammersley, for example, on the basis of an historical consideration of the so-called quantitative-qualitative divide argues that things are not so clear with issues, problematics and methodologies cross-cutting this divide.

Is appeal to phronesis, (to borrow Hammersley’s words): ‘little more than a rhetorical device designed to dismiss the arguments of those who raise awkward questions?’ (Hammersley, 1998:149). Suspicions that this might be the case in connection with Flyvbjerg’s use of phronesis are roused when one examines the uses to which this concept is put as well as the absence of discussion in regard to the difficulties of translation and meaning.

There is no awareness that appeal to phronesis is in any way problematic (cf. Mackenzie, 1991 in Smith, 1999: 329), Smith (1999: 329-30), for example, points out that many the activities, such as medicine, that today would be regarded as instances of phronesis were regarded as matters of techne by Aristotle; the Greeks would also appear to have regarded the arts as falling primarily within the domain of techne.
Worst of all, Aristotle seems to say quite explicitly (Nicomachean Ethics, 1112b11) that we deliberate not about ends, τελη, but about τα προς τα τελη, translated by Ross as ‘means’. This is the crux: if ‘means’ is the correct translation then we have here a picture of instrumental reason, and the account of phronesis becomes incoherent. (Smith, 1999: 330)

At the very least, such conceptual difficulties might lead us to be suspicious of drawing too clear a line between phronesis on the one hand and techne on the other. As O’Neill (1993: 118 in Smith, 1999: 334) observes:
‘one of the mistakes of defenders of practical judgement is to set up an opposition between “moral and aesthetic judgements” and the “technical” rule-governed rationality of science'. Phronesis cannot be exercised without the existence of rules. What such critiques point to is that appeal to phronesis is simultaneously an appeal to past authority whilst also being innovative. But if phronesis is problematic why not abandon this term altogether and instead
simply refer to ‘practical judgement’ as Smith suggests? (Innovation concealed, but not in utter nakedness but trailing clouds of theory do they come’ … smuggles in a raft of other assumptions too…) 

In this connection, F. sets up the debate in incommensurable terms from the start: …‘The two types of science have their respective strengths and weaknesses along fundamentally different dimensions.’ P.3 (i.e. implicit appeal to incommensurability, characteristic of e.g. MacIntyre’s approach – (cf. Smith, 2003)

Phronesis as characterised by the writings of MacIntyre is hostile to interdisciplinary inquiry, regarding different rationalities as incommensurable.

(For example: Which Justice? 1988: 399) where he writes that we can only advance critique or evaluation of claims and ideas in terms specific to some particular tradition.

And yet as Smith point out, even a philosopher such as Wittgenstein who speaks of different rule-governed activities or language games acknowledges that in practice we are able to understand different criteria

As Winch pointed out ‘intelligibility takes many and varied forms'

This does not involve mutual incomprehensibility – as if wholly separate and incommensurable, but rather ‘similarities, relationships and a whole series of them at that.

And so F’s project begins to come unstuck…

And so the use of ‘and’ in F’s project dissolves or re-draws boundaries in new ways, in regard to the concept of phronesis but by so doing draws new boundaries that frustrate moves towards interdisciplinary conversation. And this is a significant point at which Foucault might bite back, given half a chance.

Michel Foucault, in Technologies of the Self the Afterword to the 1982 seminars held in his honour at the University of Vermont, spoke of the ‘necessity of excavating our own culture in order to open a free space for innovation and creativity’ (Foucault, 1988: 163). For thinking otherwise… and this may involve thinking in interdisciplinary terms and yet

Rather than the effort to think differently through interdisciplinary research which might reconceive the object of enquiry in different terms (Bal, 2002, 2003; Barthes, 1987) (and on on-foundationalist assumptions (Taylor, 1995))

Need to question a series of assumptions that inform F’s project…

Does phronesis actually promote such reflexivity?

Richard Smith (2003: 315) has argued that ‘self-absorption is a constant risk of activities whose dominant mode of rationality is practical wisdom.’

In other words its much lauded focus upon practices can eclipse the ends to which such practices are engaged. He uses Stevens, the butler, in Ishiguro’s (1989) The Remains of the Day to drive home the point… Stevens is fascinated by the question as to what makes a butler first class – centres on high professionalism or dignity.
‘Stevens’ insistence of his is ‘an idealistic generation for whom the central question was not simply one of how well one practised one’s skills but to what end one did so’ (p. 116) appears self-deceiving. He has quite lost sight of the question of ends, as is shown most vividly in his uncritical adulation of his employer, the Nazi sympathiser Lord Darlington, and in his neglect of his own dying father. The exercise of his craft has become everything, and the virtues that should underpin his practice - so central of course to MacIntyre’s account - have become mere *virtuosity.*’ (Smith, 2003: 315)

And this leads to...

It's also not clear what how you’d know if your phronetic research was ‘good’ or not

F. doesn't adequately address this.
Narrative can give a description that approximates ‘rich particularity’ but it can also be a strategy that creates a calm overview and unwarranted simplification.

And according to Law and Mol there has, in recent years been a revolt against such simplification.

Despite being promoted as a means of *disturbing* the smoothness created by abstraction how do we know that the case studies produced actually don’t indulge in a form of violence themselves

Liable then to forget about the complex

How would you know?

**Question of validity**

The question of the validity of postfoundational social science is one that has been a focus of concern for Lather (1993). She recognises that validity brings with it many assumptions that are inappropriate to antifoundationalist discourse, but rather than simply abandon validity she retains the term in order to ‘both circulate and break with the signs that code it’ (Lather 1993: 674). This is because:

**Validity is a “limit question” of research, one that repeatedly resurfaces, one that can neither be avoided nor resolved, a fertile obsession given its intractability (Fraser 1989: 80).**

Lather (1993: 676) therefore calls for:

a kind of validity after poststructuralism in which legitimation depends on a researcher’s ability to explore the resources of different contemporary inquiry problematics and, perhaps, even contribute to “an ‘unjamming’ effect in relation to the closed truths of the past, thereby freeing up the present for new forms of thought and practice” (Bennett, 1990: 277).

So what might a ‘reconceptualized validity that is grounded in theorizing our practice’ (Lather, 1993: 674) look like?

Lather (1993: 676)

‘not to revert to the dominant foundational, formulaic and readily available codes of validity requires the invention of counter discourses/practices of legitimation.’

Lather’s account of the ‘catalytic’ value of case studies would appear to have some connection with D and G’s emphasis on the productive nature of concepts being key to their evaluation. As Paton (2000: 133) has summarised this:
‘...the value of philosophical concepts is not measured by their truth value but by their novelty, remarkability and degree of interest in relation to the present.’

Is this research?

**How might we think otherwise?**

*Social* science that is postfoundational needs to look for interstanding rather than understanding (Taylor, 1995). This draws upon the insight of D and G that significant insight occurs – in-between’ so that whilst assemblages join together (and thereby create surplus value) one of the key things about any (or does this just apply to people?) assemblage is that in being joined together (through the conjunctive ‘and’, for example) in-between spaces are created too. And it is these in-between spaces that are of significance to social science precisely because they are subjects that are linked and therefore ethical considerations follow... (Need to unravel!!)

nature of the assemblages and the difference that subjectivity makes.

Flyvbjerg’s (2001) *Making Social Science Matter* is interesting because of its assembling together the project of phronetic research (e.g. Dunne, 1997) and post-structuralism, especially the work of Michel Foucault, who is here characterised as ‘a main exponent of phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg, 2001:162). And case study methodology???

(Such a juxtaposition and assemblage represents a provocation to think otherwise...) Would appear to have elicited positive reviews...

**Engaging post-structuralism**

*i., Epistemes-diachronic*

Such a mobilization enables one to enquire into a genealogy of particular epistemes (Foucault, 1980)

enables awareness of how accounts of knowledge are historically contingent

can explore, for example the protocols for the production of abstract space (Poovey, 1995)

how approaches to knowledge production can be seen in terms of the fact-fiction binary (Wyschogrod, 1998)

or take a different route in through the exploration of metaphors that inform such epistemes (e.g. le Doeuff, Jantzen) (e.g. Kant’s Island, Locke, clock)

Broadly speaking such accounts take a diachronic focus, but another aspect of post-structuralist accounts is ‘resistance to the regimen of the same’ (Lewis, 1982: 23 in Mohanty, 1989: 27).

**ii., Epistemes-synchronic**

Another approach is the synchronic – i.e. that looks across cultures. Rabinow’s (1986: 241) claim that ‘We need to anthropologize the West’ argues for such an approach that challenges
economic or philosophic hegemony. Recognition that western constructions, for example, of
the self, are, in the words of Geertz (1989: 229), historically ‘rather peculiar… within the
context of the World’s cultures’.

In taking this particular line, one might draw out some of the implications of Ingold and
Kurttila’s (2000) work amongst the Innuit and the bearing this might have on knowledge
production, phronetic research and case studies.

And his account of power-effects enables an exploration of how discourse produces truth-
effects – not least because subjects see themselves within these terms Gramsci)

All forms of knowledge production serve interests, post-structuralist writing is characterised
but its inquiry into, and interrogation of, the social effects of knowledge production (Mohanty,
1989)

Law and Mol argue that their has been ‘a revolt against simplification’ and they critique the
various ways in which ‘smooth schemes’ produce an over view…

Thereby various problems become inconceivable – and unrepresentable (Elkins)

ITE
In regard to ITE it might be argued that the focus on the general displaces concern with
contingent ethical issues (Cope & l’Anson, 2003)
But also how the general has been harnessed to a performativity agenda that is difficult to
resist within these terms (Ball 2003?)
(Case studies- a strategy of resistance?)

Critical questions in regard to Case studies…
A form of writing that can privilege locally produced discourse (lpd) in contrast to abstract
discourse (ad) that displaces the local.
Rich particularity… (Mohanty, 1989)
Relationality and embodiment
Social contingencies and the aporias to which these rise and for which ethical deliberation is
necessary (Pendleberry)

In other words, ‘fit for purpose’ – ‘a strategy to be preferred when circumstances and research
problems are appropriate’ in Yin p.12
How do you evaluate case studies?

Lather – in terms of their productive effects – their capacity to stimulate thinking differently….?

Case studies as a means of overcoming the truth-fiction binary through the recognition that
they are ficciones in Borges’ terms…. Recognition of the conditions of their production and the interests that all forms of knowledge
production represent…

Enable concern to articulate problematics within local contexts…..
Then process of professional subjectification (in embodied, relational locations) becomes-conceivable

**The teacher-researcher and the iceberg**

In the EPL project there has already been some discussion of the problems of case study research and in particular the use of teacher-researchers to establish local bodies of knowledge concerning the processes undergone by probationary teachers. These TRs are based in schools, which by their nature are complex social situations in which power is exercised by a range of stakeholders, from the senior management team, through teachers, parents, pupils, down to the level of policy and politics. We use ‘down’ here because policy becomes concrete not at the level of documents or keynote speeches but at the level of buildings, books and curricula. This is a deep layer of materiality which tends to be ignored as a manifestation of power even though it is frequently in collision with the everyday idealism of teaching folk.
References

Cope and l’Anson 2003
Elkins
Fraser, N. 1989 *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Lather in Handbook
Law and Mol