Lots of cake and lashings of ginger beer: A glimpse forward to the Blytonesque future of PCET

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Borrowing the term 'Blytonesque' from Belinda Webb (2008), I elected to write the following narratives in a fictionally constructed street language similar to those used by Webb (2008; see also Burgess 1962; McAdams 1993). The use of a street style language serves to illustrate distances between those responsible for implementing changes to teaching practices and my epistemological and ontological values. Adopting the position of narrator I aim to demonstrate the ‘othering’ of me from the lived realities occurring around me. I argue the disconnections I feel are so great they have a fictional feel, an unreality that is not too far removed from Baudrillard’s (1994) notions of hyperreality. However, I am anxious not to [re]present my standpoint as one opposed to change and developments to teaching practices per se. Rather, I want to begin add a voice of caution, that in trying to create accessible education, stakeholders, policy makers and managers may be losing sight of the necessary interrelated natures of innovative, imaginative and creative pedagogies with learning and knowledge.

Each vignette, drawn from my own reflective journal, illustrates lived experiences. They record my team-teaching with a colleague newly qualified to teach in post compulsory education and training (PCET) during an autumn term. Events are set during the first presentation of a new ITT programme (first initiated across England from September 2007), and reflect tutoring a 2nd year part time ITT group.

Vignette 1
Week 1:
‘I just need to tell you we’ve moved you to my group’ Anne announces. She’s holding a jar of sweets.
Trainee looks blank.
‘Anne is your tutor now’ sez I.
‘You mean you’ve rejected me’ she looks at me.
Perplexed, I speaks slowly, ‘no…’ I thinks fast, ‘no, Anne requested you’. I smile in what I hopes is an encouraging, friendly way.

‘I’ve been rejected … I feel rejected.’

Quandary. Discombobulated. I experience multiple thoughts and/or responses around the edge of which, coming ever forward is a formidable spectre – Ecclestone (2005). She comes forward through the chaff and flack, sidestepping any posey responses I might devise. Her power-dressed
presence grows, swamping Miss Anne’s nicey nice approach. ECCLESTONE (2005).

Keeping it even, now that the damnation of supporting a therapy culture and perpetuating learned helplessness (Seligman) has entered my scope. I say (again) firmer now, less smarmy, ice-creamy nice, ‘you have not been rejected’. I hopes my flatter tone will end the matter.

‘But, you have rejected me’ she sez.

Not sure – me. Finks I, ‘don’t have time for this – do I care? Am I being manipulated or unprofessional?’ Membering Ecclestone (2005a); who is hovering, shaking her head in a don’t-let-me-down kind of way, I change tack. I smiles, big this time, ‘are you saying your self-esteem has been affected?’ I

axed, all nicey nice in a cosey cushion comfortable kind of way. At my periphery, Miss Anne is flipping frantically through the course folder – where is this in the scheme of work, lesson plan, record of work, activity sheet-handouts? She’s worried I mig

ht say more off message; I can tell by the caught in the headlights kind of anxious looks she slips my way. Don’t be too harsh I thinks – it’s not her fault she was given the job. Although I could do without having to pay homage and obeisance to the self belief she has in her own nadmenny magnificence to do the job. The abject rightness projected as her self based on her choodessny ability to follow pre-written, formulaic plans to-the-letter has passed me by. I tries to ignore my irritation with her effic

ciency, calculability, predictability and control – the ultimate McEdutainer (Jackson 2010). Am I jealous? Has the old green eye slip slip slidded, ‘specially since she’s new. She’s new. I KNOW. I member her attending classes on this course year before last. Not just new then – an ex trainee. Play nice.

Meanwhile, Ecclestone (2005a) inclines her head slightly, she gets my mischief.

Learned helplessness responds. ‘Yes’ she sez, all jutting chin and lank grey hair. ‘Yes, my self-esteem is way down … Timmy [last years tutor] wouldn’t have done this’

yeah Timmy used to bring us sweets’ adds another gromky trainee chipping in goobery-like without invite.

‘Good for Timmy’ finks I. I must member to thank wur Tim when next our eyes meet.

As I recalls it, Timmys the one that wrote the article for the all-pals-together happy-clappy, internal jolly teaching magazine. What did he say? Ah yes, I members now … no place for theory in teacher ed; Wur Tim believes theory is serves no purpose. According to wur Tim, theory is of little relevance for trainee and new ‘teachers’, which in itself is an interesting theory. Mind you, shouldn’t knock Timmy; after all wur Tim got the job at the expense of ‘theoretical’ colleagues. Member, soo committed to his views is wur Timmy he runs a CPD course in ‘how to make theory more practical’. You bet I’ve signed up for it.
Meanwhile, Anne is all of a flutter, anxious not to be cast worse than Tim in the ‘tutor’ popularity stakes; she announces, ‘I have CAKE!’ …

I argue these observations suggest a Baudrillard style simulacrum – a copy of teaching that has no reality other than in the imaginings of stakeholder policy makers and managers; people that Hayes (2003) referred to as ‘know nothings’ (p.29). Yet, underlying notions of creativity, imagination and interrelational connections between pedagogy, learning and knowledge such as been proposed by Murphy and Hall (2008; see also Zukas 2006) should not be situated as a barrier to developing teaching practices. Yet, my experiences suggest that current (and proposed future) practices resemble a pastiche far beyond my worst imagining. They are beyond Ritzer’s (2002; see also Bryan and Hayes 2007) envisioning of McDonaldized education. I argue the reduction of post-graduate teaching to parody resemble a new trend, one I have termed ‘Blytonization’ (of education). In this world, the idea of theory has become separated from practice and practice has been renegotiated as sparkle and razzmatazz (Wallace 2007). In this future, cream cake, sweets, glue, glitter and chocolates have been embraced as ‘good’ teaching and learning practices for PCET. My fear is that practice artistry, which involves the juxtaposition of theory-practice relationships will be lost. It seems that some values of the academy are being swept away; dismissed in a new era of consumerism, where customer is queen (or king) and in educational contexts this majesty is occupied by students.

Certainly my experiences indicate a sugary-coatedness beyond even the imaginings of Kathryn Ecclestone’s (2005a., b., c.) critique of PCET practices verging on the therapeutic (see also Furedi 2004). I argue that the future is beyond therapeutic. It is becoming, has become, infantilised; truly a land reminiscent of Enid Blyton. Imagination and creativity have been shifted, notions of praxis murdered and a theory-practice gap is being constructed, the interconnectedness is being wrenched apart by the mediocrities, who are rejecting theory because they fail to understand its value.

**Vignette 2**

Week 6:
‘You can go home if you want?’ Miss Anne offers.
Me, why?
‘I can manage… I’ve done the lesson plan…’ she says, all enthusiastic, breathless and pleased with herself.

Did I miss a meeting?

‘s’ok we’re both down’ I say and as an after thought ‘thanks’. I’m feeling a bit miffed. No, worse than that, insulted – patronized? I’m tired of Miss Anne’s desperation to take the lead but, only on the bits she cherry-picksy chooses. Any of the hard stuff like ‘curriculum theory’ and models of reflective practice’ she leaves to me. I offered to do some team teaching with her, to help her find her feet within the different subject area. Apparently education isn’t really a subject, certainly not something she needs to be concerned with as a member of the teacher education team, ‘I’m here mainly to do observations’ she nadmenny announces, smuglike; all puffed-out chest and strutting posture, ‘the graded ones’. 
Oh really?

‘Mmm ...have you done many?’ I arksed.
‘oh yes ... loads.  I’ve been doing them for Georgina [our line manager] you know’.
‘ah good’ sez I, ‘coz I’ve been wondering, how have you been grading their confidence in subject pedagogy?’
‘Uh?’

‘It’s right here’ I points to the grading guidelines (see appendix V).
‘I’ve brought cake for tonight’ she says.

I let the sand she has thrown drift down around me. Less irritated, more internally gleeful. Can’t wait to tell the others – the ‘naughty teddies’, ‘little tinkers’ up to tinker things that only we gets to laugh at afterwards over cups of cha and gossy goss. Like characters from Blyton’s books we’re often positioned as naughty and breaking the rules of the nursery. Back to the toy cupboard for us; remnants of ‘ago’. I think I see where they’re coming from and in the noveau technical rational but ever so nicey world that is ITT.

Later: I surveys the classroom. It’s a changed space. The tablet chairs are gone. No more straight lines or open ‘u’ formations. In place are community tables that facilitate group huddles with backs to th

The introduction of cake, as a significant resource for teaching reminds me of the food focus prolific in Blyton’s stories. This glimpse into a Blytonised future is uncomfortable – for me. Somehow, during the course of this research endeavour I have become displaced. I am uncertain whether this displacement is of my own doing. I want to be positive about the new regimes but, I find it increasingly more difficult. From each of these interactions I identify a thousand opportunities for further research. My own place, delivering HE in FE is shifting, which brings with it some uncertainty for future.
Vignette 3

Week 9:
‘Are we having a party?’
Double-take. ‘I’d just axed for questions, concerns about the assignment.
‘Yeah, can we have a party?’
Chepooka, I frowns – they notice. ‘look at ‘er face’ one of them announces gleefully. Some snigger and I know with sinking certainty what’s coming. And it does.
‘Timmy let us have a party last year’.
Good for him.
I shrugs.
‘You don’t look too enthusiastic’ they challenge.
Interestingly, some look sheepish, am I getting somewhere?
I smiles. Crocodile. No Miss Anne this week. Down to business.
‘The assignment essay …’ I begins
‘You haven’t said about a party’ one whines, persistent. I raise an eyebrow; arching it in what me hopes is an imperious gesture.
‘Shh’ she’s silenced by another – she glares – traitor. They don’t back down.
She looks across to the self proclaimed ‘naughty table’ they focus on the board. She Humps.
I continue – not smug though; this is progress and I intends to keeps it going.
Truculent they settle for now and I wonders – maybe it’s me? Yet, they follow; we do stuff for the assignment without more party talk. And, I reflect; my confusion lays in their infantilisation in this space yet, outside they are my teaching peers. Is it me?

Week 10:
Uh-ho. I notice Miss Ann is in – the bright, xmassy wrappy festive package and box of mince pies on her desk kinda gives it away. My tumblry rumbly sinks. Deep and hollow. Then I spots it – a Santa hat. You heard me right, a Santa’s hat. This is just bezoomy baddywad. Me slumps.

A burst of gold, pink and glitter, magpie chattering – they’re back. A vision in gold and red, brocade and silk combo with Mao Tse Tung collar, more Chinese New Year than birth of Christ, Miss Anne approaches. I feel underdressed. She smiles, ‘for tonight’ she reaches for the parcel, ‘for tonight I thought we could do the stuff you know what you said and then we could do this’ she waves the package at me.
Right.
I decide not to arsk what-the-hell-is that? I do nonchalant. ‘Yeah, sure – whatever’.

It’s pass the parcel. OMG.

I’m put in charge of the muzac; cheery jingle bells and merry merrys. ‘Make sure you stop it for everyone’ Miss Anne whispers.
Right.
As Bing dreams of White Christmases I realise I’m not going to wake up; I really am am here …
The vignettes show Blytonization being embedded as models for practice, which utilizes sweets, cakes, chocolates and biscuits as instruments of motivation. Games and activities situate students in a perpetual motion, continually occupied, no time for thinking beyond the surface trivia. Learning spaces have also been reshaped to reflect these changes. Tables are grouped into oblong or square shapes that facilitate students sitting around them. The notional ‘front’ of the classroom has become redundant and the space for tutors minimized. Tutors reside beyond the cluster-of-tables arrangement where gluing and gossip take precedence. Left to wander, in small spaces not designed to accommodate crafting tables, tutors are situated ‘outside’ their students’ activities. In this future, on the periphery of the activity laden, sparkly chocolate learning surfaces tutors ensure no second is left unfilled, no student inactive or unchallenged. Diversity, equality and all needs, special or otherwise, are catered for as checklists of good practices, professional standards and policy must-dos are met.

Reflecting on these narratives questions regarding the future of education practices in PCET arise. From my perspective, a challenge here involves deciding how to accommodate changes proposed for ITT by stakeholders, managers and policy makers; who are not necessarily educationalists, without losing pedagogic, aesthetic and education cultural/community values. At some point, I feel, voices within PCET communities need to be heard above the noise of ‘better standards’, ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’.

Ecclestone K (2004c) ‘Knowing me, knowing you: new forms of legitimation in post-16 education’ Discourse Power Resistance Conference, 5-8 April
Murphy P and Hall K (Eds) Learning and Practice: Agency and Identities, London, Sage

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