

BRIAN SIMON AND PEDAGOGY

Contribution to the celebration of the life and work of Brian Simon (1915-2002)
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In 1981, in a book which he edited with Bill Taylor, Brian published an article with the famously challenging and uncompromising title 'Why no pedagogy in England?'

Taking the OED definition of pedagogy as 'the science of teaching', Brian wrote:

No such science exists in England ... The contrast here with other European countries, both west and east, is striking. In the educational tradition of the Continent, the term 'pedagogy' has an honoured place, stemming perhaps particularly from the work and thinking of Comenius in the seventeenth century, but developed and elaborated in the nineteenth century through the work of Pestalozzi, Herbart and others. The concept of teaching as a science has strong roots in this tradition.

Not so in England. It is now more than a hundred years since Alexander Bain published *Education as a Science*. Since then, less and less has been heard of this claim. The most striking aspect of current thinking and discussion about education is its eclectic character, reflecting deep confusion of thought, and of aims and purposes, relating to learning and teaching - to pedagogy.¹

Brian had by then been involved in pedagogical debate since the 1950s and he brought to it, as always, a formidable breadth as well as depth of perspective, at once historical, psychological, international and empirical. But this was no mere armchair multi-disciplinarity, nor was his challenge issued with lofty detachment for others to take up, though many of them – of us – did so. Simon the historian combined with Simon the campaigner to command that we treat 'Why no pedagogy in England?' not just as an intriguing academic question but as something which directly and urgently affected the educational prospects of children in primary and secondary schools, here and now, and for that reason alone demanded action.

I've mentioned Comenius and armchairs. Staying with both for a moment, those of you who have enjoyed conversation with Joan and Brian at Pendene Road may have noticed that the great Moravian educational theorist and reformer was there too, watching and listening, just to the left of Brian's chair, where Joan had judiciously positioned his portrait. 'Neglect history,' Comenius seems to be saying 'at your peril.' As if such a lapse, in that house, were possible! The combined 500-year span of Brian's and Joan's published historical studies – conservatively, from 1485 to 1990 - provided the first, and grandest, frame for Brian's analysis of the development and problems of English pedagogy, from Kempe, Mulcaster, Bacon and Milton via Priestley, Godwin and Hartley (and many more and much else besides) all the way to Burt, Plowden and – well, yes, if we must – the Kenneths Baker and Clarke.

The second frame of reference came from psychology. We've heard how Brian immersed himself in that discipline and took on Cyril Burt and the psychometric establishment in order to build up the case against intelligence testing, streaming and selective secondary education. That campaign also led, through the Russian translation of Brian's book *Intelligence Testing and the Comprehensive School*, to a study visit to Russian schools and research institutes in 1955. There, Brian was struck by the stark contrast between the two pedagogical traditions: on the one hand, English fatalism, manifested in the absolute

dominance of the hereditarians, the apparatus of testing and early streaming and the general assumption that children's potential was fixed at birth and schools could do little to change it; on the other, the Russians' no less firm belief in human perfectibility, educability and the transforming power of good teaching.

Brian resolved to bring the optimistic alternative to Britain. Together with Joan, who learned Russian for the purpose, he edited two collections of papers by leading Soviet psychologists, the second of which started with what is probably Vygotski's best summation of his ideas about development, cognition, learning and teaching, written in 1934. Later, at the author's request, Joan translated Luria's *Speech and the Development of Mental Processes in the Child*. The Luria book in particular had a tremendous impact, not just in the UK but in many other countries too. What an undertaking – and what a partnership!

Brian's third frame of reference was much closer to home in terms of place as well as time. Having fought and won the battle against early streaming he now witnessed primary schools jettisoning this practice at a surprising rate but with no clear idea of what to put in its place, for 'mixed-ability teaching' is an organisational context, not a teaching method. Indeed, the *Forum* evidence to Plowden had warned that research and guidance on mixed-ability teaching would be needed once streaming was abandoned, but the Committee failed to respond. Brian wrote:

We were in the midst of a major transformation relating to teaching and learning in primary schools, yet hardly anyone seemed to know anything about it. In these circumstances I felt the need to initiate research myself into this whole, fascinating but still secret, field.²

The 'secret field' was a reference to the prevailing 'Black Box' approach to classroom research which, strictly speaking, wasn't classroom research at all because its methodology of pretest-posttest with control and experimental groups completely ignored the pedagogical processes which lay between the two phases of testing.

Once again, Brian was ahead of the field. Harking back to the insights he gained from classroom observation in Manchester and Salford as long ago as 1946-7, he resolved to break open the Black Box. During the early 1970s he worked with the late Deanne Boydell to develop instruments to permit the actions and interactions of teachers and children to be systematically observed, coded and analysed. In their final form Boydell's Teacher and Pupil Records were used in the groundbreaking ORACLE research project which Brian directed with Maurice Galton from 1975-80. It was groundbreaking because it was the first large-scale observational study of British primary classrooms; because at last it shifted the focus of attention in pedagogical debate to the interactions between teachers and children through which teaching and learning are most tellingly mediated; because it exposed some startling myths as well as truths about what was going on in post-Plowden primary schools (naturally, the myth-makers, who included a good many senior politicians, were not prepared to listen); and because it influenced a generation of researchers and projects in Leicester, London, Bristol, Leeds, Cambridge, Exeter, Newcastle and elsewhere. In 1999, Maurice and his colleagues published the follow-up to ORACLE, showing what in primary classrooms had changed since the mid 1970s and – more significant still – what had not. And other research studies in progress using modified versions of those same classroom observation tools which Deanne Boydell developed with Brian's support nearly thirty years ago.

Actually, Brian was studying classrooms even earlier than the 1970s. In 1946-7, while teaching in Manchester and Salford, he undertook two small empirical exercises. One tracked the progress of first year secondary pupils from the 11+ through a year of being streamed and labelled 'A', 'B' and 'C', to their end of year examination, with results which fuelled his conviction that the 11+, and its pedagogical concomitant, streaming, were not only inequitable but also fundamentally inefficient and unreliable.

The other study foreshadowed his later concern with the management of post-Plowden unstreamed classes. Here is an extract from his 1947 observations of a Standard III class at Abbott Street all-age school in Manchester, near to which, writes Brian, 'the malodorous River Irk flowed bright green in the mornings, yellow in the afternoons':

At 11.05, mental arithmetic for ten minutes. The teacher formulates problems involving adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing, with ordinary numbers and sometimes money.

At 11.15 'Take out sum books' (no relaxation of any kind), 'Right, carry on.' Half the class immediately queue beside [the teacher's] desk for corrections, the rest work at their own pace through a textbook, taking up the rough work for correction every three or four sums...

At the end of the morning's work:

'Right, places'; all sit.

All arrange their desks, each book in its right place. [The teacher] looks rapidly at each desk.

All books collected. He names an individual from each group (of four) who collects a book and pencil from other members of the group; the monitors then collect these and put them away in a cupboard.

'Stand'. All stand. All say prayer.

'Gangways down'. All move out of desks to space between each row.

At his word, all move to form two lines at the door.

At his word, the door is opened and the children file out.

Very different from the ORACLE Teacher Record, though not a thousand miles from the ethnographic studies with which ORACLE is often contrasted, but this was 1947, a generation before classroom observation of any kind had entered the mainstream of pedagogical research.

These perspectives – historical, psychological, international and empirical – come together in that celebrated article 'Why no pedagogy in England?' My main reading, which I come to now, is in fact compiled - I hope not over-freely - from two sources: the original 'Why no pedagogy?' article and its 1993 reprise, 'Some problems of pedagogy, revisited.'

It may be useful to advance an interpretation as to why the concept of 'pedagogy' has been shunned in England, and why instead our approach to educational theory and practice has tended to be amateurish, and highly pragmatic in character ... The reasons [are] linked with the traditions, practice and outlook of the dominant schools historically - the 'public' schools - on the one hand, and those of the elementary schools on the other. The public schools placed their major emphasis on character formation rather than on intellectual or cognitive development, a standpoint clearly reflected in the scepticism as regards teacher training (which they neglected). Their objective was to produce leaders for a country with an imperial role. The elementary schools, on the other hand, were primarily concerned with inculcating elementary literacy and numeracy, but also with the social-disciplinary role of 'gentling the masses.' The main motivation underlying educational practice in both systems ... was more ... concerned with attitude and character formation than with promoting intellectual development. And here ... lies the historical root of the neglect of pedagogy.

This neglect ... was strikingly reflected in the low level of involvement of the country's leading universities (Oxford and Cambridge) in educational (or pedagogical) studies, both historically and more specifically since the 1890s when university education departments began to be established. There has recently been a

change here of course, and Oxford now actually has a professor, but this was the most belated appointment of all.

... The historic neglect of pedagogy ... established a kind of vacuum in the area of educational theory applied to teaching. Such theory that was developed and applied, for instance in the first half of this [the twentieth] century, having no established criteria for judgement, was highly subject to the winds of fashion – to pedagogical initiatives which ‘seemed to work’ according to various, sometimes contradictory, standards, as also to psychological theories developed elsewhere but now quite arbitrarily applied to education – for instance Freudianism, psychometry (or mental testing), later Piagetianism. All this ... found its classic expression in the Plowden report of 1967. The theory of child development underlying educational practice encapsulated in that report was ... an extreme version of what might be called pedagogic or psychological individualism. The main message was that each child must be seen, and treated, as a unique individual – as a product of genetic differences exacerbated in the interactional process from birth to such an extent that the unique character of each individual child is the overriding consideration.

... This was, in effect, a call for the total individualisation of both teaching and learning... Plowden defined the teacher’s role as to spark, or organise, appropriate activities, to intervene tactfully where necessary, to monitor pupils’ development across ... three parameters [intellectual, emotional and physical], and generally to lead from behind. Group and individual forms of classroom organisation were encouraged, but particularly the latter. [Whole] class teaching was sharply discouraged.

... This was ... a recipe for disaster because it obviated any possibility of developing effective pedagogic procedures within the primary classroom. If each child was to be treated individually as unique, how could general pedagogical principles appropriate for *all* be developed? Yet to achieve the latter lies at the very heart of the concept of pedagogy – the science of teaching.

... The teachers in [the ORACLE] sample overwhelmingly used group and individualised activities across the various areas of the curriculum we observed – to that extent their practice tended to correspond to the Plowden precepts. But so complex was the situation that now developed in the classroom that we found the teachers’ managerial skills stretched to the utmost. But here lay a contradiction. In this situation the teachers had neither the time nor the energy to individualise their interactions with pupils as seen as central by Plowden – that is, to engage in long-term educative dialogues with individual pupils. Their main concern had to be to maintain an ordered and ... disciplined classroom ... The striking result ... was that ... the teachers were typically highly active, interacting with pupils for nearly 80 per cent of the time. But the downside of this was the extraordinarily low level of interaction by individual pupils with the same teachers – down to an average of only 83 seconds in a one hour session. This pattern of interaction ... was primarily determined by managerial requirements ... Interaction with teachers was typically very brief and also, incidentally, primarily didactic. This clearly contradicted the Plowden precepts which ... now appeared as utterly unrealistic.

... The basic tenets of child-centred education derive in particular from the work of Froebel who held that children are endowed with certain characteristics or qualities which will mature or flower given the appropriate environment .. The teacher should not interfere with this process of maturation, but act as ‘guide’. The function of early education, according to Froebel, is ‘to make the inner outer’. Hence the emphasis on spontaneity, and the concomitant concept of ‘readiness’.

That there is a fundamental convergence between this view and the theories or assumptions embodied in intelligence testing has been overlooked; nevertheless it is the similarity between both sets of views as to the nature of the child which made it possible for both to flourish together... Intelligence testing also embodied the view that the child is endowed with certain innate characteristics ... and that the process of education is concerned to actualise the given potential... Both views in fact deny the creative function of education, the formative power of differential educational (or life) experiences. The theoretical or pedagogical stance of the Plowden Report represents an extension of these ideas.

...What, then, are the requirements for a renewal of scientific approaches to teaching – for a revitalised pedagogy?

We can identify two essential conditions without which there can be no pedagogy having a generalised significance or application. The first is recognition of the human capacity for learning. It may seem unnecessary, even ridiculous, to single this out in this connection, but ...fundamentally, psychometric theory, as elaborated in the 1930s to 1950s, denied the lability of learning capacity, seeing each individual as endowed, as it were, with an engine of a given horse-power which is fixed, unchangeable and measurable in each case, irrevocably setting precise and definable limits to achievement or learning. It was not until this view had been discredited in the eyes of psychologists that serious attention could be given to the analysis and interpretation of the *process* of ... learning.

The second condition ... is the recognition that, in general terms, the process of learning among human beings is similar across the human species as a whole.

...To start from the standpoint of individual differences is to start from the wrong position. To develop effective pedagogic means involves starting from the opposite standpoint, from what children have in common ... to establish the general principles of teaching and, in the light of these, to determine what modifications of practice are necessary to meet specific individual needs.

... Pedagogy, [Vygotsky] wrote, 'must be oriented not towards the yesterday of development but towards its tomorrow.' Teaching ... must always take the child forward, be concerned with the formation of new concepts and hierarchies of concepts, with the next stage in the development of a particular ability, with ever more complex forms of mental operations ... The 'zone of next (or potential) development' implies in the educator a clear concept of the progression of learning, of a consistent challenge, of the mastery by the child of increasingly complex forms. 'The only good teaching,' insisted Vygotsky, 'is that which outpaces development'.

... The new pedagogy requires carefully defined goals, structure, and adult guidance. Without this a high proportion of children ... will never reach the stage where the development of higher cognitive forms becomes a possibility.

Brian's perspective on pedagogy, as we have seen, was exceptionally generous in its range – historical, psychological, international, empirical. It was also in many respects ahead of its time. His early observational work picked out the problems of labelling, teacher expectations and the self-fulfilling prophecy long before they were accepted as serious themes for research and indeed policy. He probed the fallibilities of hereditarianism, intelligence testing and streaming at a time when much of the educational and political establishment accepted them as doctrine. Long before Vygotsky, constructivism, scaffolding and the zone of potential development passed into fashionable educational parlance (note that I am using Joan's – and Luria's – more accurate translation from the Russian rather than the more familiar yet less appropriate 'zone of proximal development') Brian urged the Piagetians no less than the psychometricians to opt for this less determinist, more optimistic account of

human development, and to accept the new pedagogical responsibilities which it signalled. He detected very early the weaknesses in post-Plowden individualism and its associated patterns of classroom organisation. He exposed the myths about post-Plowden primary classrooms which politicians and the press had nurtured and indeed to this day continue to nurture.

The continuing mischief (or mere laziness) of the educational myth-makers reminds us that few victories are permanent, that British atavism forever lurks in the wings, and that genuine educational progress demands continuing vigilance. Thus, the historical condition of unprincipled, fashion-led pragmatism, as Brian analysed it in 'Why no pedagogy?' has lately reappeared, dusted and polished, as 'what works' – an ostensibly novel criterion for judging not just classroom practice but a wide range of educational, social and economic policy as well.

As Brian wrote at the very end of the final volume of his *Studies in the History of Education*:

The last half century ... has been a period of struggle, of rebuffs, but sometimes of victories in the continuing endeavour to ensure access for all to a full, all-round education ... involving recognition of the full mystery of human potential. That struggle will continue.

¹ Simon, B. (1981) 'Why no pedagogy in England?' in B.Simon and W.Taylor (eds) *Education in the Eighties: the central issues*. London: Batsford.

² Simon, B. (1998) *A Life in Education*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.