

Education, Policy and Social Justice: Searching the Borderlands Between Subjective Science and Experimental Art

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As the global economic crisis worsens, it is timely to think through the role that education will play and should play within this unprecedented milieu. Historically, public schooling in the United States has been a follower. Whether Sputnik (Brzezinski, 2008), so called lack of discipline (Cantor & Cantor, 2001), back to basics (Gehring, 2008), or falling standardized test scores (Kaplan, 2008), public schooling has reacted to policy directives as opposed to being at the forefront of these directives. This reactive role has strengthened the conservative nature of this institution by interpreting policy coming into the schools through established dominant traditions and discourses (Gitlin & McConaughy, 2008). This embrace of these dominant traditions and discourses diverts schooling from its potential role in forging policy. And not just any policy, but policies that can redefine and challenge one of the effects of the current global economic crisis—the growing gap between the “haves” and “have nots”.

The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development ((OECD, 2008) speak to this effect, in their report titled “Growing Unequal”, and suggest that the upsurge in economic inequality will create increased *divisiveness* (my emphasis) between the rich and poor. (p.5). We can begin to see this divisiveness between the haves and have nots in the U.S. with the emerging tensions between “wall street” and “main street”. And so far, without question, wall street (the haves) is getting the vast majority of money as part of the economic bail out programs. Given the probability that the gap between rich and poor will increase as will violence and dissent between have an have nots, it is urgent that schools do not respond to this economic crisis by reacting to new policy initiatives that are likely to try to maintain the privilege and advantages of the haves . What is needed is not only an assertion of the importance of social justice (a form of justice loosely defined as making group relations more equitable) as an ambition for schooling, but the development of knowledge producing epistemology’s within schools that are not totally seduced by their conservative traditions and discourses.

The possibility of this role ,while difficult indeed, is surely something that has been conceptually articulated and tried in a number of school settings (Shor & Freire, 1987; Caro-Bruce et. al, 2007). The work of Paulo Freire, who understood that literacy requires learning to read and write, at the same time that it requires those who have been marginalized, Brazilian

peasants in his case, to “name the world” (Freire, 1993), is an exemplar of putting social justice into practice. What Freire’s work suggests, is that schooling can teach literacy and at the same time teach social justice by allowing marginalized voices to name the world. By doing so, those in positions of dominance do not solely determine what counts as literacy and legitimate knowledge (Apple, 2004). This move to challenge the sole construction of literacy on the terms of those in positions of dominance also challenges the push/pull process of policy implementation where the literacy policy provides opportunities for marginalized groups while at the same time these policies reinforce the dominant groups rights and legitimacy to define fundamental process such as literacy in their own interests. Redefining literacy from the position of those who have been silenced, at the same time one is teaching literacy is a way for schools to further social justice, be pro-active in policy making and challenge the gap between haves and have nots. Yet, developing these alternative knowledge producing epistemology’s will be no easy task. A look at two examples from the current political scene in the U.S. might be instructive.

The headline in the New York Times (Dillon, December 4, 2008) discussing potential candidates for Secretary of Education states that it is “a cabinet choice that will signal a new schools policy” (p.29). In framing this issue, the article identifies two camps vying for control of the choice of Secretary of Education: One focusing on professionalization, those who believe the focus of educational policy should be on “helping teachers improve their instruction” and the other group on “efficiency, those who emphasize standardized testing, cracking down on poor management, and purging bad teachers” (p.29).

What is telling about the selection of the new Secretary and the supposed new school policies that might emerge, is that there is little *new* emerging from either camp vying for control of the selection of Secretary of Education. Professionalization, and the improvement of instruction, are issues that has been discussed in academic and policy circles for decades if not the entire history of the common school movement (Borrowman, 1965). Much the same can be said about the efficiency movement, standardized testing and ridding schools of bad teachers (Callahan, 1962). If either of these camps carry the day are new policies likely to arise? I think not. Instead, it is very likely we will see new jargon renaming policies that either have failed or have proven to be elusive in terms of their translation from policy to practice (Elmore, 2004). And even if these are good policies and need to be tried one more time, the fundamental problem

is that they are very narrow in scope, focusing primarily on supporting teachers or getting rid of them. Schools have rarely if ever responded well to such overly facile solutions (Fullan, 1993), and with the demands of our new crisis it is less likely that a narrow traditional policy reform for schooling is going to make schools pro-active in addressing the demands of our “new” world.

The unprecedented crisis we are in, requires thinking and action that is innovative¹, new in every sense of the word. One key to making a more equitable world, is to foster citizens that see equity between groups as in everyone’s interests (i.e., it is in everyone’s interest to work across differences such that difference is the engine for learning and growth not violence and the destruction of the “other”) and are able to act based on thinking that does not simply repeat the failed proposals/policies of the past. Innovation, however, appears to be in short supply. For example, on one financial show broadcast every morning on United States television, The Kudlow Report (CNBC), there is a mind numbing parade of talking heads that argue for regulation of banks, businesses, etc. and those who speak for free trade. While I find the free trade talk a particularly insidious form of neo-liberalism (Peters, 2001), I am also taken with the fact that both groups are trotting out one of the oldest cliches in American politics—the need for government to stem crisis’ or the need for government to stay out of crisis’. And when these talking heads do suggest some innovative approach, it is innovation by businesses to increase their profits—there is no shared common good or even suggestion it is in all our interests to close the gap between economic haves and have-nots (5/5/09).

Using these two political examples as a jumping off point it is clear that schools and businesses have become efficiency machines—for businesses it is profit as always and for schools efficiency is based on standardized test scores. The primary focus of these institutions is a type of socialization based on knowing the facts, following procedures and rules, and doing as one is told, not innovative epistemology’s tied to forms of social justice. I am not blaming individuals or groups for this limitation. Rather, I am centering my attention on the affirmative

¹Even conservatives are now talking about creative and innovative ways to proceed. In the *New York Times Magazine* December 28, 2008 for example. Shell oil, in their advertisement, states in bold letters, “In the new energy future we’ll need to think around corners” (p.13). Following this full page ad with another full page, they further this line of thinking by noting that, “If it doesn’t exist we’ll need to reinvent it” (p. 15). Shell is hardly a liberal institution and yet they are selling at a tremendous cost their innovativeness and thinking outside the box—being creative. Furthermore, on CNBC Squawk Box , (December 30th, 2008) the host suggested to a guest that his focus on history, on the traditions that have formed the current state of the New York Stock Exchange, no longer apply. The guest, a conservative economist, agreed without hesitation suggesting that we need to find innovative ways to work with the stock market because the old rules no longer apply. The implication is we need to be innovative not historically bound to make our decisions about the future.

culture of these institutions (Marcuse, 1968) that has encouraged a reactive limited approach to policy formation and knowledge generating epistemology's, and a compliance orientation that stands in contrast to the urgent need for innovative approaches to knowledge production. It is time, it is past time, for schooling to be proactive and socialize students and teachers (and reward them for doing so) to be innovative citizens. In my view, this is a key foundation (not sufficient in itself) to move toward equitable relations that are seen to be in everyone's interests.

So how can schooling move in this active innovative direction directed at social justice? A start is to understand that schooling should be about more than dispensing knowledge, it should be about the opportunity to produce knowledge through some form of inquiry. Without this production at best a hierarchy is produced between the knowing (those given an opportunity to produce knowledge, the policy developers, and the needy, those who are seen as needing the policies and related practices to direct their work (Gitlin & Peck, 2005). Along with this move to expand the sites and individuals where the production of knowledge takes place, the knowledge produced must escape a technical focus and be tied to an ambition such as social justice. Why? Because this is the only way to avoid policy that does nothing more than make deeply ingrained traditions more effective. While some of those traditions might be helpful, others are limited and especially problematic given the economic crisis we find ourselves. Efficiency is fine if everything is working—but clearly that is not the case now and the future is bleak if we can't address the growing gap between haves and have nots. Knowledge must be tied to aims, ideals, and ambitions, and equity, at this historical juncture, otherwise dissent is likely to increase and tear communities and even nation states apart as the gap between have and have nots increases. Finally, and this might be the most important part, the process of knowledge production, the methodology if you will, has to embrace and reflect innovation. An alternative methodology, a methodology that is not seduced solely by its own traditions, pushes against community boundaries, genres, and traditions as it moves to produce new knowledge geared to social justice. By doing so, one can minimize the push/pull process that limits change to what is and has been (Gitlin, 1999).

These aspects of knowledge production may seem outside the realm of possibility in schools. Fortunately, there is a tradition of knowledge production connected to schools and social justice, for more than a half century, that has been in place in schooling around the globe—

action research. While action research is not a singular methodology² (Stenhouse, 1975), many of the most influential developers of this approach have suggested a link with social justice. Inherent in this approach is a value and respect for those who have traditionally been left out of the knowledge production process. There is also a bold move to link conceptual work and practice thereby avoiding trickle down theories where research is supposed to trickle down from the knowing to get into the hands of practitioners (the needy) to make their practices more effective. Action research, therefore, suggests that schooling already has done some of the foundational work necessary to address the global economic crisis before us. And yet, with all this promise, action research as is true of so many methodologies, is tied and seduced by a set of traditions largely unseen which make the knowledge produced reflective of the past as opposed to the possibilities of an unknown innovative future (Cates, 1985). Put simply, the new ideas, like the examples above, are rarely new or about change but rather primarily about maintaining relations of power and dominance at exactly the time we need to come up with new ideas for the radically different conditions we find ourselves. What we need is new forms of knowledge production that are freed to better serve the purpose of social justice (more equitable relations in a general sense) and to do so through policies that escape the limits of the same old tired approaches that have dominated the political landscape of the United States and for the most part have increased the gap between rich and poor. We need innovative knowledge!

To bring consideration to the set of methodologies known as action research as well as move beyond these methodologies in developing new and innovative forms of knowledge production that can meet the social justice challenges of our new world, this essay considers a few foundational traditions that inform some of the major developers of the action research methodologies. Once these traditional constructs are identified, the work of Joan Miro is illuminated as an exemplar of a segment of the art community, what I will refer to as the experimentalist artists³, that provides a contrast with the traditions of action research which I will argue belongs to a genre of methodologies I term subjective science. The essay concludes with a turning point that looks at how subjective science and this alternative experimental art approach

²I use the word methodology to describe action research because the term method often suggests a technique, a neutral approach, that lies outside of values, politics, and ethics. Since action research is often linked to social justice, it seems more appropriate to call it a methodology that brings values, politics and ethics to the fore at the same time that it works to produce knowledge that can lead to some view of social change.

³John Cage (1963) uses this term to describe an array of artists who have gone beyond the boundaries of their discourse communities.

might be used so that action research can reinvent itself to more strongly embrace an ethic of social justice, broadly defined, in our schools and do so in innovative ways.

Foundational Constructs of Action Research as Social Justice

Many approaches to action research embrace one form or another of social justice. They also make great strides in comparison to so called objective or positivist sciences that are less able to deal with moral, ethical, and political issues (Keita, 2009). Finally, while many positivist sciences and some qualitative studies still treat the subject of the research as an object, at the very least the practitioner within action research is given a much more prominent role thereby challenging, in part, the notion that the “body” of the research (its methodology) reproduces the hierarchy between researcher and those who are the “object” of the study while the purpose of the research is to move toward social justice (Gitlin, 2008). In these ways, action research makes significant strides toward enhancing possibilities for social justice. Yet, if we dig a bit deeper, it is possible to see that action research represents more of a continuation of thinking and practice than a significantly new direction. To do so, I am going to chronicle some of the most prominent developers of action research. While other important action researchers are not included, it is my claim that many if not most would also base their approach on the same foundational constructs I will identify in the following section.

Subjective Science

In particular, I want to argue that action research primarily challenges positivistic approaches to science while still staying within the confines of science. Put differently, development within the action research methodology is foundationally based on a move that is limited to moving from more so called objective forms of knowledge to subjective ones without challenging the foundational , deep rooted assumptions of science. For example, so called objective science and action research are quite similar in their desire to produce an understanding that is thought to be better than the informal understandings emerging from consideration of everyday experience by cultural actors. The assumption I am making, therefore, is that science is a very broadly defined knowledge producing epistemology. Dewey’s view of science, for example, has little in common with positivist science and yet both approaches call themselves science.⁴ Put in more

⁴ While the boundaries of science will become clearer later in this essay when subjective science is held side by side

detail, Dewey and the action researchers chronicled move in a subjective direction to produce a moral science that can ask questions of social justice in one form or another and do so by reformulating what it means to do science (in contrast to positivism). While this move to a subjective science is critical if one is interested in issues of social justice, such a move largely overlooks the way science, even a subjective science, a moral science, may limit movement toward social justice. If action researchers reflect a subjective science perspective, as I claim they do, it would be important to ask what are the deep structures, or foundational constructs, that inform this subjective science. These constructs include: trying to produce understandings that are better than what commonly happens if teachers (or other participants) are left to their own devices, and a focus on the real, on reality, such that habits are seen and confronted that limit movement toward social justice. These constructs suggest that the future can be “captured” based on answering questions about the past/present, the real.

Understandings Better Than

A subjective science, as is true of all views of science produces understandings. However, these understandings differ from Truth claims in so called objective science in that the understandings produced embody a subjective element. Yet, what ties both “objective” science and subjective science together is that they both claim to produce better understandings than what were produced naturally in the real world by cultural actors. The only difference is that one set of understandings is seen as not ever needing revision—it is truth outside of context, and the other, because of its intersubjectivity and contextual nature is likely to consistently need revision.

For Lewin, (Gold, 1999; Lewin 1948; Lewin 1946; Lewin 1935) one of the original founders of action research, and many academics of all stripes, one of the problems for change and social justice is that prejudice, pre-judgements of some sort, rules over understandings coming from guided systematic reflection on practice. Powell (1980), in his discussion of the history of teacher education institutions, provides an exemplar of how prejudice can be challenged through understandings that are better than those emerging through science, in this

with experimental art, Dewey’s (1989) work on a reconstructed science that is transactional and focuses on growth is very much in line with the approaches used by Elliott’s worthwhile educational experience and Stenhouse’s focus on judgment. Dewey would likely disagree with Carr and Kemmis on ideology and the focus on wider social structures because of his deep concerns about dogma, but it is likely he would be quite supportive of their view, as is true of Lewin’s, to move away from prejudice toward decisions based on systematic inquiry that linked reflection and action (Dewey, 1989) In this sense, my use of the term subjective science is nothing different than calling

case scientific research. Specifically, he makes the point that teachers colleges, in the 1940's and 1950's staked their claim for legitimacy and authority in relation to normal schools, who were experientially oriented, on the position that they would base their decisions on scientific research. This research would not only confront the low status of normal schools and their focus on experience and reflection but would also confront the type of decision making that had been common before the explosion of teachers colleges where politicians wielding power, such as those holding the position of school district superintendent, decided on a political, personal basis what schools, teachers, and teacher education institutions should look like and how they should operate. Science, in this way, was viewed as a form of social justice when compared to the prejudice views emerging from everyday decision making because authority was associated with objectivity—the doing of science. Where everyday decision making embodied prejudice because of its subjectivity, the so called objectivity of science produced understandings that were better than those commonly found within the politics of school administration and the understandings prized in normal schools that were based on experiential reflection. When Schools of Education started to replace Teachers Colleges in the 1950's and 60's this emphasis on science not only was maintained but actually grew stronger (p.142)

To think through the connections between “objective science” and the emergence of subjective science in the form of action research, I want to relate it to the work of Professor Glaser of the famous team of Glaser and Strauss that more or less invented current forms of qualitative research through the development of grounded theory. Professor Glaser argues that grounded theory is an extension of scientific principles (Glaser, 1992). He states that the comparative method , which is at the heart of grounded theory, has its roots in science. The difference between traditional science and grounded theory, was that grounded theory was a bottom up approach that viewed practitioners as legitimate knowledge producers. Subjective scientists who practiced action research claimed, as did their so called objective science counterparts, that the understanding produced was better than unsystematic reflection by teachers or others (such as the politicians mentioned earlier) but also held advantages over traditional science in that the authority to make decisions was more inclusive thereby tipping one’s hat to issues of social justice. This inclusivity (Popkewitz, 1998) was not only politically in line with democratic ambitions but as importantly helped make subjective insights more useful

Dewey a subjective scientist as well—for he developed a science that was much different from traditional positivism.

(Fesmire, 2003) than objective science because the insights or understandings emerged from an insider point of view—someone who lived and worked in the context and was reality based (took place in practice) not under more lab-like conditions (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Subjective science was not only better than non-systematic reflection but also objective science, that required outsiders who didn't know the context well (didn't live and work in that context) to produce understandings of that context.

Stenhouse (1985; 1982; 1980; 1972;1968; 1967; 1964) , a developer of action research that brought it to the field of education, in particular, reflects this generalized move to a subjective science found in many forms of qualitative research when he states:

that research can only markedly improve the art of teaching if it offers hypotheses whose application can be verified because they can be tested in the classroom by the teacher or offers descriptions of cases or retrospective generalizations about cases sufficiently rich in detail to provide a comparative context in which to *judge better one's own case* (my emphasis) (Stenhouse, 1985, p.50) .

Stenhouse appears to endorse a subjective science (the art of teaching to use his words) concerned with the production of better understandings through hypothesis testing and the production of subjective generalizations (a subjective science). Put differently, Stenhouse endorses a subjective science in that understandings by the practitioner, is of utmost importance because it is the practitioner who lives and teaches in the real context of schooling. And this subjective science produces judgements and understandings that are better than those found in lab studies that use statistics or through the common practice of teachers simply reflecting on what they do (p.48 and p. 51).

Not surprisingly, Elliott (2007, 1996, 1989, 1978) being a student of Stenhouse, uses some of his views to argue for “teaching for understanding” (Elliott, 2007, p.118-9) He develops his thesis by stating that:

He (Stenhouse) argued that the teacher who used his position of authority in the classroom to promote his own views would necessarily impose constraints on the development of an understanding of controversial issues.... From this consideration Stenhouse formulated the principle of procedural neutrality.... Thus failure to protect divergence (keeping in mind alternative views of the issue at hand) was logically inconsistent with the project's aim. Stenhouse's procedural principles functioned as criteria for selecting teaching acts which were logically consistent with the development of understanding learning tasks (teaching for understanding) (p.118).

Elliott's take on “teaching for understanding” is that it is better than a teacher who imposes his authority on the classroom. To move toward “teaching for understanding”, the teacher must

consider divergent issues, “the obligation to refrain from taking sides on a controversial issue (p.118).” By doing so, an understanding is produced which is less prejudice, the teacher doesn’t impose prejudicial views on the students, and instead understandings are produced that emerge from a neutral take on schooling. Because the understanding of the teacher is improved, one can argue that Elliott uses a subjective science that produces an understanding of schooling that is better than that produced through the imposition of the perspectives that teachers hold without considering divergent points of view.

At first blush, Carr and Kemmis (1986) and colleagues (Kemmis & Smith, 2008), a team that linked action research with a form of critical theory, appear to have nothing in common with science. They severely criticize positivist science and even interpretative social science in making their case for a critical social science. However, if you accept the view that there can be a subjective science that is based on understanding that is better than, a different conclusion is possible. In developing their view of a critical social science, they quote Fay (1977) in making their case for this approach to action research.

Critical social science is clearly rooted in concrete social experience....; it offers enlightenment to them [practitioners] about what their real needs and wants are; it demonstrates to them in what way their ideas about themselves are false and at the same time extracts from these false idea ideas implicit truths about them, it points to those inherently contradictory conditions which both engender specific needs and make it impossible for them to be satisfied (p.157)

Carr and Kemmis, given this view of a critical social science, appear to be saying that their approach can distinguish between real needs and wants and those that are not real. Further, this critical social science can identify false ideas and also direct individuals toward truth. And finally, this critical social science can identify the conditions (beyond the individual or group) that lead to false impressions about needs and wants. Because Carr and Kemmis begin with the statement from Fay that critical social science is rooted in experience, they are inclined to place the teacher who operates within educational contexts in a position of authority in that the teacher must be involved in this process if enlightenment and change (transformation to use their words) is possible. To achieve this transformation, action research as a form of critical social science is able to identify a subjective approach (i.e., it is based on understandings of the teacher and others) that produces understandings that are better than the false needs, wants, ideas that limit change. Their approach to action research does so by showing teachers the “conditions” that lead to these false positions and understandings replacing them with truths. In this way, Carr and

Kemmis endorse a subjective science based on the production of understandings that are better than the understandings produced when teachers and others don't know their real needs and wants and the ways their ideas have become distorted. In this sense, teachers are placed in a contradictory role such that they are in need of a critical friend (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) to show them the way at the same time they are at the center of the critical social science they identify.

The “Real”, Habits, and Social Justice

Given the common thread of a subjective science and the production of understandings that are better than, what are some of the other foundational constructs that inform this subjective science. To produce this “better than” approach a focus on the real, on the working out of practice within a context is also a common thread. This should not be surprising because action research, in particular, is based on an anti-foundational approach (Rorty, 1982) that priorities everyday practice within a specific context. The basic method, if you will, of all these approaches to a subjective science, is to have teachers (or other practitioners) reflect on their practice (on the past up to the present) including for Carr and Kemmis the wider contexts that influence the specific context being observed such that their understandings escape the habits (Gitlin, 2009). Habits are a critical point of departure for action researchers interested in social justice because as opposed to a vague approach of reflecting on experience, habits are one root that ties decision making to the status quo. But how do subjective scientists reflect on habits to produce understandings that are better than?

To reflect on habits, subjective scientists, as is true of positivist scientists, focus on the real. The focus on the real, on everyday practice, is a common theme as an approach to social justice not only in action research but defines what is qualitative research for some of the most influential anthropologists (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). What this assumes is that looking carefully at the past up to the present in less prejudicial ways within real contexts leads to forms of social justice. Lewin, for example, talks about the bombing of Germany. He states:

[A] a certain factory has been chosen as the first target. After careful consideration of various priorities and the best means and ways of dealing with this target. The attack is pressed home and immediately a reconnaissance plan follows with the one objective of determining as accurately and objectively as possible the new situation....Frequently, more fact finding about the situation is required.... The next period is devoted to the overall plan. This reconnaissance or fact finding has four functions: It should evaluate

the action by showing weather what has been achieved is above or below expectation. It should serve as a basis for correctly planning the next step. It should serve as a basis for modifying the overall plan. Finally, it gives the planners a chance to learn, that is, to gather new general insight (p.269).

In this sense, social justice (defeating Germany in this exemplar) requires that planners escape habit (they learn from fact-finding) thereby producing more accurate information that looks at the past up to the present within a real context. Stenhouse appeals to this same approach when he states that we escape habit not by deliberation in a foundational sense that reflects self pride but rather the learning that comes from reflection on our practice:

It is one thing to inquire into truth by deliberation, but quite another to make ostentation the end of all disputation. For while the first is devoted to study which strives to edify, the second is the mere impulse of pride which seeks self glory. By the one we set out to learn the wisdom we do not possess, by the other we parade the learning which we trust is ours (p.178)

For Stenhouse (1983), as is true of Lewin, social justice, what he calls vernacular humanism, is based on escaping habit formed in the near past, in this case the habit of thinking that a teacher possesses a truth as opposed to being in a constant struggle to gain knowledge, thereby learning from real school contexts such that application not generalization is emphasized (p.174)

Elliott (2007) also appeals to the same sort of construct in his discussion of teacher accountability when he states:

The only way to determine [accountability in a democratic sense is not through test scores but rather] the causal significance of teaching in particular situations via case studies of patterns of teacher-pupil interaction. In other words, evaluations of teaching are appropriately based on the study of what is actually happening in the situation where it is going on (p.67)

Elliot following the other influential scholars views social justice as emerging from research that figures out what is actually happening. This research take place in real situations and focuses an accounting of the nature of teacher-pupil interactions.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) also argue for a similar construct in their conceptualization of praxis. As Kemmis states:

Initial praxis development and subsequent transformations of practice occur by doing practice and learning to see *more richly and more far-sightedly* (my emphasis) into what its consequences are for students, their families and communities, and others. Necessarily, this involves learning about one's own formation and continuing development and transformation as a teacher or educator through practice (p32).

What I take from this account is that praxis not only leads to transformations (forms of social justice) but it occurs through escaping habits of what had been taken for granted practices.

Through a process of reflection on practice that includes accounts of the wider conditions structuring that context, a school case study of the past up to the present fueled by rich and far-sighted information (i.e., better than more the understandings teachers currently possess) can move education through the transformations needed for social justice.

In sum, all the important scholars in this account endorse some sort of subjective science that produces understandings which are better than what is done more commonly in institutions such as schools. To produce these understandings, these pioneers of action research link social justice to working at the level of practice, the real, such that reflection on the past up to the present becomes the mechanism used to escape habits that reinforce the status quo.

The Borderlands between Experimental Art and Subjective Science

If action research as subjective science is more of a continuation than a change in that the questions raised and the methodologies themselves are limited to the insistent debates about subjectivity and objectivity and their compatibility or lack thereof (see, for example, Creswell, (2008); King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994 and Eisner & Peskin, 1990), if action research as subjective science embodies contradictions in the role of the practitioner, the central participant in this set of methodologies, if action research as subjective science helps create a knowledge hierarchy between subjective science and experiential knowledge (the knowledge produced informally in everyday practice) with its focus on understandings that are better than, and if subjective science lists to the past/present with its focus on the real and the critical assessment of habits as opposed to the unknown future where possibilities are born, it may be time to look beyond the boundaries of subjective science. When I say look beyond, I don't mean abandon or leave subjective science. Although I have focused somewhat on the limits of this methodology, subjective science has produced much that is important for social justice.

The problem with which we are all confronted, however, is that the global economic crisis will place even greater importance on the role of schools to act as a mediator for social justice. Discovering innovative ways to practice social justice in schools is likely to require more than just closing our eyes and hoping that the same old approaches will somehow work out. The terrain upon which we move, live, and work, in my view, has been fundamentally altered and even if old ways worked satisfactorily, the urgency of the crisis and the new challenges before us, require policies and practices that lean heavily on the generation of innovative,

creative, and imaginative ideas. In part, this means seeing what has become naturalized (Danto,1981). I have tried to do that by showing that action research as social justice, a dominant approach to social justice across the world, as concerns schools, reflects more a continuation of thinking than an alteration of thinking. However, if this essay is to begin to achieve its purposes, the problem is not simply “seeing” (that is the project of subjective science) it is being creative and innovative in developing social justice methodologies.

One way forward is to look at the borderlands between subjective science and experimental art, a segment of the art world, that has been directed at issues of social justice, but does so in a way that appears quite different from the foundational constructs associated with subjective science. Again, this is not to replace subjective science with experimental art, rather to consider Jasper Johns’ notion of inbetweenness which he describes when talking about his exhibition entitled “Grey”. (Umland, 2008).

The very inbetweenness or irresolution of gray is its (the exhibition) principal characteristic. Within a larger oeuvre in which fixed meanings are eschewed, doubt is vigorously cultivated. I think a painting should include more experience than simple intended statement (p.34)

This inbetweenness suggests that the tensions between subjective science and experimental art should not be resolved by choosing one or the other or combining the two. Rather, by keeping them in “irresolution” or tension with each other and by letting the audience enter into this irresolution, the possibility exists that the audience will take the project of linking methodologies for social justice beyond the ambitions of the author. Why is this important? Because such an approach allows for consistent and continual innovation—a methodology or even a set of methodologies does not become rigid and impotent, instead the methodology is consistently revitalized by creative and innovative ideas that extend beyond the ambitions of an author or authors.

To put into place this inbetweenness, I have gone to the segment of the art world, that is sometimes called abstract, expressionist, modern, avant garde, etc. Some notable artists from this segment of the art world include Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamps, Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, Joan Miro and a number of artists associated with Surrealism and the DADA movement. While labeling these artists is helpful in some ways, specific labels such as abstract or modern, etc., tend to focus on their differences. In contrast, my focus is on the deep connections that tie these artists together. To unearth this deep commonality, I lean on the writings of John Cage

(1963) who suggested that the above noted artists including himself be referred to as experimentalists. They are experimentalists in the sense that they have been raised in a discourse community, yet have all pushed (experimented) beyond the boundaries of their discourse communities and invented ways to work with images unlike the historical traditions of their community. In doing so, each one of these artists, implicitly if not explicitly, has proposed a knowledge producing methodology that is tied to social justice—a justice that challenges cultural norms and reinvents those norms by the practice of an art language, where the language itself reflects the shape of imagined futures. This art language is in line with desire as opposed to the more common situation found in subjective science where language roots us to the past/present as we attempt to push beyond that presentness. By pushing against boundaries and inventing an art language linked to imagined futures these experimentalists not only challenge the norms of the status quo but illuminate through their art language possibilities for an imagined future.

My focus for the experimentalists is on the work of Joan Miro. His work is used as an exemplar of the larger group of experimentalists to consider what an experimental art approach to social justice might look like. In November 2008, the Museum of Modern art presented a exhibition on the work of Joan Miro entitled *Painting/Anti-painting-1927-1937*. I had the good fortune to see this exhibit and my word images. What follows is based on my observations and published texts related to this exhibition.

Understandings Better Than Imagined Futures

In talking about this exhibition, Lowry (2008) states that Miro wanted to paint and assassinate painting. He did so because of “his deep engagement with the exigencies of his own time” (p.vi). I take this to mean that Miro was not only concerned with the developing events that would become WW1 and the war itself but also transformed his art from a somewhat traditional approach to painting, to taking on the accepted values about what counts as good painting found across the world at this time, toward the construction of images through collage, a new art language (anti-painting). This period of work might be seen as a disavowal, a challenge to the history of painting. And this disavowal is linked, according to Umland (2008), to Miro’s acute apprehension over the “threat of Fascism and totalitarian ideologies looming on the world stage” (p.vii). Miro, however, didn’t only disavow the traditions associated with painting at this time he also worked on developing structural heterogeneity (p. ix) Put differently, his art was neither

stable within a piece nor solid and lasting. This heterogeneity and instability caused great concern and problems for those trying to put Miro's work on the art markets of this time. And yet, for Miro part of his move to painting/anti-painting was related to the way painting became a code word for a shallow reliance on convention and interest in monetary reward as opposed to innovation (p.6)

In speaking about this move to collage, this disavowal, this heterogeneity, Miro replied that it “ was a revolt against a state of mind and traditional painting techniques that were later judged morally unjustifiable (p.1) Did Miro give up painting? Hardly. Instead, he kept painting and anti-painting in tension with each other. And even though Johns and Miro were not contemporaries in any sense of the word, Miro's painting/anti-painting appears to reflect Johns inbetweenness in that both embraced tensions but let the two sides of the whole live side by side with (and without) each other.

This embrace of tension suggests that Miro's work operated on the borderlands between discourse communities(Gitlin, 2008)⁵. Operating from the borderlands differs from the emphasis of subjective science on problem solving. Within experimental art there is no need to solve a problem because problem solving is directly related to producing understandings that are better than, and this is not the ambition of experimental artists such as Miro. As opposed to seeing prejudice, for example, and then trying out actions that will solve this problem, Miro's methodology, if you will, presents images that illuminate an imagined future (i.e., he imagines what it means to move beyond the norms of the painting discourse community) and holds that future in tension with the values, orientations, and relations currently found in society . I want to argue that part of Miro's methodological uniqueness is that he put into relief the norms of his own discourse community (the painting community found in Europe). In contrast, many if not most subjective scientists seem more interested in maintaining the codes, conventions, and traditions of their discourse communities then putting into relief the norms of these communities. This is so because these subjective scientists are trying to produce understandings that are better than. Producing understandings that are better than is hard to do at the same time you are revisioning the very norms that lie at the foundation of the methodology used to produce those understandings. In contrast, because Miro is not trying to produce understandings that are better

⁵ It is interesting to note that this embrace of tension stands in contrast to the great Frankfurt school critical theorists who often focused on negation (Adorno, 2005), or took an Hegelian (1910) dialectic position to produce a new synthesis.

than, he is freed to revision his discourse community. If you believe, as I do, that all communities have limits and that the only safeguard to these limits is consistent and vigorous vigilance, then pointing to the contrast between actions that sustain discourse communities (e.g., problem solving by way of producing understandings that are better than) and those that move to the borderlands between communities (e.g., challenging discourse community norms by way of producing imagined futures) may be a significant issue to consider when it comes to change and social justice.

Challenge Authority through Inclusiveness Challenging Authority Itself

Between 1927-1937, the period showcased in this exhibition, Miro was very interested in looking at the issue of authority. Along with subjective science action researchers, Miro understood that the issue of authority is strongly tied to social justice because who holds positions of authority (and who does not) influences norms and has much to do with unequal distributions of wealth and hierarchies more generally. For the action researchers chronicled, authority was dealt with in two significant ways. First, the action researchers challenged the authority given to academics researchers over practitioners by suggesting that teachers or practitioners more generally were legitimate knowledge producers. (Gitlin and Thompson, 1995). Although as noted this authority was contradictory (teachers were viewed as knowing and needy) it did represent a move at making authority more inclusive, as long as practitioners became more like academic researchers (i.e., as long as they became subjective scientific researchers) Secondly, action researchers also challenged traditional research in the form of positivism and some forms of quantitative research that could not adequately address issues of social justice nor develop a moral subjective science. Put directly, action researchers as subjective scientists challenged the notion that only those with “objective” knowledge should be seen as authorities and instead subjective knowledge should also confer authority to those producing this knowledge. Again, this move toward inclusiveness is important and critical work. However, Miro and other experimentalists, dealt with authority is a significantly different way.

For Miro (in Umland, 2008), authority, in part, had to do with the foundational values found in society and the posing of alternative images. In commenting on some of the pieces shown in this exhibit, for example, Miro states:

a refusal to make 'pretty' things pushed me to use the most sordid and incongruous materials possible. I denied my gifts and turned against my facility refusing the 'miracles' as a sign of my contempt for success (p.7)

What I take Miro to be saying is that a primary value or belief in society is the construction of what is deemed to be beautiful or pretty. All his training (his gifts and facility) had taught him how to make pretty things. Part of his success, notoriety, and yes authority was based on his ability to produce painting that society felt were pretty or beautiful. However, if he was to challenge the forces of Fascism and totalitarianism more generally exploding throughout Europe and beyond, he felt compelled to take on notions of pretty and the authority conferred to those doing "pretty" art as well as its link to success within the art world. While Miro was clear in later years that in spite of his efforts not to achieve success he did, at the same time he opened up possibilities to rethink the value of pretty and its connection to success. In particular, he held pretty (as a traditional value orientation of this time) and grotesque in tension with each other leaving open a space for the audience and others viewing his work to live with broader views of what is beautiful or pretty, thereby opening up possibilities for broader views of success generally.

Miro also worked with the issue of authority by looking at the notion of author itself. Authors by definition achieve some success and authority by, at least, partially accepting the conventions of their discourse communities. Being known, being an author, getting published, is often associated with the individual and the approval of their discourse community. This approval within academic circles, where subjective scientists often work, occurs through the use of a peer review process where the peers, although blind to the identity of the author, are chosen because they are members of the same or similar discourse community (e.g., a critical theorist reviews a paper by a critical theorist).

One of the assumptions of author/authority is that the work reflects the intent of the author. Put differently, there is a direct relation between the work and the individual. Further, it is the individual who produced the work and therefore should reap the rewards of being seen as author, as an authority or one sort or another. Miro, in contrast, in his important 1930 essay, *A Challenge to Painting*, states that he tried to "eliminate compositional choice, authorial intent and all signs of individual personality" (Umland, 2008, p.7). One can not say definitively what this means, but a case could be made that Miro is challenging the notion that intention is directly related to the work produced, thereby confronting the notion that works should gain the authority

held by the author. Furthermore, Miro also is challenging the notion that an individual actually deserves the credit for the work. If it is true that self changes with place, time, and interaction with others (Tuan, 2004; Davidson, 1996), then to give full credit to the author for the work is to obscure the relations (place, “others” in time) that are literally part of that self. Miro clearly was questioning the notion of individualism (along with the view that your intentions are truly yours) associated with the production of work and its link to authority and success. He is suggesting that authority is relational, it is rooted in relations between self, place, time and “others”. Authority within this conception emerges from communities or cultures and therefore the related success, material and otherwise, should also be rooted in the community. Where hierarchy is justified because “I” earned it through my authority and related success, this alternative view of authority has an egalitarian tone suggesting that an individuals success should be seen as part of the communities success and the rewards distributed accordingly.

Miro was able to challenge “pretty”, the relation between intention and practice and individualism, by moving from the traditions of painting to collage and inventing in many ways a new language to express images, ideas, etc. In part, that language was one of non-unification. Miro resisted the notion that his work be characterized as a single entity. Instead, his works of this time produced discontinuity, such that the grotesque/pretty sit side by side with (without) each other. But Miro’s language also went further, one way to challenge individualism and intention directly was to sign his collages on the back where no one could see them. As now should be expected, Miro both signed his collages reflecting an individual author and confronted that notion by questioning the legitimacy of doing so –signing the back of the collage.

What can we make of this comparison of subjective scientists doing action research and experimentalists such as Miro? One impression is that the primary value used to promote social justice for subjective scientists is inclusiveness. While such a move is critical and one might make the case is even essential, the problem with this approach is that it accepts the hierarchy of author/authority itself. Subjective scientists do so, by asking teachers to do research, be like them, and yet still insist on guidelines or their role as critic (i.e., Carr and Kemmis’ notion of a critical friend). In contrast, Miro, and other experimentalists are not concerned with letting more people into the authority club and its link with success. Instead, he explodes the norms of the club itself. In this way, Miro went directly after the hierarchy itself and did so by challenging the basis (norms) of his own success and by raising questions about the relation

between the methodology producing the knowledge (in this case painting) and the values that went along with their socialization in a discourse community. As opposed to simply being more inclusive or acting as a critic for the norms of a discourse community, Miro and the experimentalists, developed a new language, a way to illuminate, to act on the relation between knowledge and success. Miro's art language, in the form of collage, opened up possibilities for himself and others to become knowledge producers without having to concede to the norms of his historic painting discourse community which as he notes was tied to morals that were morally indefensible (Umland, 2008, p.1)

Real, Habit, Past/Present, Rational Real/Unreal, Future, Emotional

If subjective science is a continuation of debates and practices that run along the line of objective/subjective, then it shouldn't be surprising that one line of continuation fits within the broad heading of the rational. Within subjective science the rational means the production of understandings that are better than. A common way to produce such understandings within subjective science is to be as objective as possible or to eliminate emotion which some argue creates falsehoods and prejudice which work against the production of research knowledge (i.e., the rational) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glaser, 1998; Cates, 1985; Cohen, & Manion, 1980). Clearly, the action researchers chronicled try hard to rid their set of methodologies of emotion. As noted, it is thought by scholars such as Carr and Kemmis (1986), for example, that by eliminating emotion one can determine the "real needs" of practitioners, avoid the reification of ideology as truths, and escape habits that hold us back from movement toward social justice. The dominant way within subjective science to produce such knowledge is to focus on the real, the context of schooling, to see how problems arise within the real and reflect on the attempts that are made to solve those problems. What I want to suggest in this section of the essay is that Miro approaches these foundational constructs in ways that are quite different from those commonly found within subjective sciences such as action research as social justice (Ax and Ponte, 2008).

The first hint that Miro is doing something different is his statement that the "*spirit* of the work is the only thing I am interested in" (Umland, 2008, p.2) as concerns the work shown in the Painting/Anti-Painting exhibition. I found this a telling statement when I compared this to how I view my work. When I talk about my work, I talk about the ideas I am trying to develop and

how people respond to my work, is it well received, has it become published in a good journal, has it make a difference in schools. I can't think of a single time when I used the word spirit to be the only thing I was interested in nor do I remember any conversation with other academics where the word spirit was used to talk about the only thing they were interested in as concerns there research and writing.

I take spirit to be an essence, a holistic sense of the work rather than its form or content or in art the materials used. Yet, I find this view very liberating and important for thinking about social justice. How the reader thinks about or responds to Miro or academic work is, in part, its content and form. Within an academic context you might say this argument made me think of this or that or helped me rethink a particular idea or concept. However, to move someone to action to take the risk of acting in ways that challenge norms and traditions (a sense of social justice) that are by definition deeply embedded and valued within discourse communities may require more than getting one to think about this or that. And it could be that what we need in terms of actions that further social justice is not only a concern for content and form but also spirit. More will be said about this shortly.

To develop this spirit, Miro utilizes the “real” differently then most if not all subjective sciences such as action research as social justice. Specifically, Miro both uses the real and then contrasts this real with an imagined real or unreal. The paradox is not resolved, just like John's inbetweenness is not resolved. Instead, the non-resolution is used to open a space for the audience to go beyond the real to a innovative almost dream like reality that can only be imagined. In talking about the Miro exhibition, for example, Umland (2008) suggests that Miro's collages reimagine the human body, “not in the ideal of a harmonious rational order but as subject to and at the mercy of libidinal impulses and subrational drives” (p.8) Miro, in my view is making two moves here. First, as suggested, he is claiming that the real is not fixed nor set but a construction that embodies open spaces (Hejenian, 2000) for alternative realities. As Miro notes this critical assessment for one of his lesser known pieces, “what I've drawn is too dependent on reality, as though it was a fetish” (Umland, 2008, p.12). The real as fetish is Miro's way to suggest that such a take holds us back from an imagined dream like future while casting its lot with the past/present and the categories images and problems emerging from the past/present. The real as fetish reinforces the status quo and gives habits a prominent place in the production of knowledge. While habits do help create reality, they focus our attention on what

was and is and not so much on what could be. By moving to the spaces between dream futures and reality, and the development of art languages, habits take on less importance. Instead, what is important is that the viewer or reader explore the space between realism and imagined futures and then use this exploration, a forward imagination (as opposed to a backward re-flection) to consider new practices, policies, and relationships. And this forward imagination is at the core of Miro's project to not only challenge the atrocities of war but see a new imagined future possibility. Secondly, Miro is suggesting, through his notion of spirit, that while there may be a downside to prejudice, in that the rational can challenge prejudice at the same time it separates the mind from the body and soul (Anzaldua, 1990). And why is this an issue? It may be an issue because Miro is trying to figure out how his images make a difference in a world that is at war and suffering tremendous injustices. He seems to suggest that if we are to make a difference the non- or sub-rational might be included. And it is the spirit, the emotions and desires that move people to act. His art is an embodiment of this type of knowledge production. In talking about his art of this period he says "I attach an even greater importance , as you can see, to the materials of my work. A rich vigorous material is necessary, it seems to me, to give the viewer that smack in the face that must hit him before reflection comes in" (P.17). While the subjective scientist who practices action research links reflection and action, Miro pushes us to consider what may be missing from this linkage, the smack in the face that proceeds reflection and action. And what gives someone a smack in the face? Not empirical evidence, not rational thought, but emotional vitality in the form of desire and passion, a discourse found in his Spanish Dancer.

For subjective scientists, such as action research as social justice, the focus on the real allows for knowledge production and action to be in the hands of the practitioner. As opposed to hoping that research will trickle down, this linkage is thought to tie reflection and action such that teachers, for example, can make better decisions and act on schooling to further social justice by escaping the habits that keep us tied to the status quo. Experimentalists such as Miro, take an alternative approach. He starts by opening a space between the real and the unreal. This opening allows the process to list to the future making habits less important and instead illuminates possibilities of what could be. Because Miro is not a scientist, he is not concerned with understandings that are better than. This is a freedom of sorts for Miro and the experimentalists, because they are less seduced by the allure of separating out the body and soul

from the mind or the emotional from the rational, objective-like knowledge. However, Miro does not simply place the emotional back in the equation of knowledge production but instead views the spirit, the emotional, as all that counts in his work. Why? Because in his view the emotional, the spirit, gives his work the smack in the fact that can propel reflection and action. While subjective science is likely to get teachers to think anew to see schooling differently, Miro's methodology is likely to move the knowledge production process in ways that include imagined futures not seduced by the categories codes and language of the real as well as fostering greater compulsion to reflect and act based on being moved emotionally in one way or another.

Turning Point

This essay began with the claim that the game has changed. Where it was possible to allow the push/pull process of school policy implementation to go from one fad to another, the global economic crisis has caused a new urgency for change fueled by increasing gaps between haves and have nots and the likelihood of extreme forms of dissent which can destroy communities and nation states. The reactive approach of knowledge distribution (teaching what dominant interests suggest is correct and legitimate) will not address the new needs and desires required to respond to our new economic realities.

To address these realities this essay has suggested that schools broaden their historical mission to solely distribute knowledge and be knowledge producers. However, not any knowledge will do. This knowledge production, now available for groups and individuals who have been excluded within the school community, must expand beyond its technical roots to make educational processes more effective and become engines for ideals, values, and ambitions. One such value is that of social justice, which makes a bit of sense given the increasing gaps between rich and poor. This value oriented knowledge, however, can not be based on a methodology that does not look back at its own assumptions. If it is to be an engine for social justice being reflexive about the values, orientations, and practices that inform this alternative epistemology is essential. This is because all epistemology's that become rigid in time take on the interests of the past of the new but established traditions. An innovative methodology must consistently reinvent itself to serve the needs of social justice.

Some may say that this sort of alternative epistemology is impossible. But that is not the

case. The history of action research shows that this sort of alternative epistemology is possible. Yet, as the essay has argued, action research is more of a continuation of established traditions than an alternative, and thus is limited in achieving social justice. One way to move beyond these limitations is to move between subjective science and experimental art. Experimental art, as exemplified by Joan Miro, provides a number of possibilities, one of which is the ability to not be seduced by dominant discourse communities that form the foundation of our methodological values and concepts, but to look to imagined futures by going beyond established epistemological traditions (not giving up on them). Miro did so by moving between painting and anti-painting. He was not stuck within the epistemology of painting.

In much the same way, action research in schooling can move beyond defined categories like time of task, back to basics, stronger discipline and the current version of what students should know (Hirsch, 1999). Action research can at times take a break from science (producing understandings that are better than) and for a moment work with inventive categories that are the similar to Miro's collage. For example, instead of thinking about classroom management as disciplining the other to conform to a set of rules, there may be times when discipline can be about establishing relations that allow for and encourage students to be innovative and think outside the box. In this sense, innovation defines the boundaries of legitimate behavior not just conforming to established rules of authorities.

The lack of conforming is not only important for innovation and change (not a new bottle with the same wine) but also for challenging authority itself. So much of the gap between the haves and have nots is about economic realities. However, economic realities are neither objective nor simplistic, they are based on conceptual foundations like who has authority in a society or community, what it means to be successful and even a basic value of desire like what is deemed to be beautiful and pretty. Action research has done a wonderful job at making authorities, experts, a more inclusive group. This epistemology however, has done less well when it comes to reinventing what authority, success and even beautiful/pretty means and how those categories help create hierarchies between haves and have nots. By holding subjective science and experimental art in tension with each other (John's inbetweenness) alternative epistemology's can work simultaneously on two levels making the category of authority more inclusive and also redefining that category so that new work practices and relations can count as successful , desirable, and of having legitimacy in a community or society.

One of the ways to redefine success is through a notion like spirit—in other words the spirit of the work counts as important in making the knowledge produced successful. One interesting aspect of the term spirit is that its vagueness, allows one to escape the dictates of the real and their connection to past traditions and discourses. By doing so, one is able to imagine a future not controlled and determined by the past (i.e., hold the real and unreal in tension). Spirit allows for us to be free, to be innovative and consider what is desirable no matter how unreal it appears at the moment. Having an African American president felt unreal only 6 months ago in the United States. You were clearly a utopian who did not know reality if you suggested this could happen two years ago. Someone, and in fact, many had to imagine it for decades in order for it to become a reality. What I am saying is that imagination and inventiveness is essential for change and yet in our approaches to knowledge production we often ignore that aspect of change. Miro did not ignore that aspect of change as he produced knowledge through experimental art. His notion of spirit paved the way for imagined futures that play an important even an essential part in change that is at least partially freed from the past.

Spirit also plays another important role in knowledge production. It is the side of knowledge that has a strong emotional dimension. While action research and knowledge production in general tries to get rid of emotion (this is part of a subjective science), one advantage of emotion is that it can provide the “smack in the face” that some need to transform knowledge into action. So often knowledge is heard, left as interesting or not, and soon forgotten. One advantage of experimental art is its intensity. In many ways, it is disquieting and provocative. This provocation while not without its limits has the possibility of drawing one beyond knowledge production to action. In contrast, while action research is about action, it often begins to fade quickly because it starts to feel like much research, well rehearsed and thought out but not really connected to life to classrooms—even if the classroom is one in which you sit..

By working the borderlands between subjective science and experimental art, it is my hope that the open spaces within this essay, the word images, will take you beyond my intentions and imagination. That your new compulsion will not be to solely sustain discourse communities with their traditions, codes and habits and instead press to the unknown and the possibilities of schooling leading the way to a socially just society. A society that creates spaces for a freedom that will allow us to be innovative and creative in our methodologies and practices for social

justice as we confront a global economic crisis never seen in modern history

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