

*Transition Education as Critical Practice*¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature and role of those forms of tertiary education that have been variously described as ‘transition’, ‘foundation’ and ‘bridging’ education. It argues that much of the relevant literature is grounded implicitly or explicitly in technicist and liberal functionalist discourses. It then reviews and critiques some of this literature and explores aspects of critical educational discourse with reference to transition education. Drawing on relevant literature, the paper makes a number of suggestions that need to be considered if transition and foundation education is to move beyond amelioration and become an important form of emancipatory and transformative critical practice. Themes addressed include the roles of transition educators in supporting learners, the clarification of expectations of learners and educators, key aspects of the learning environment, the need for critical educators to address issues arising from the wider social context, specifically those concerning the control of the curriculum, and finally the need to develop policies and practices which are consistent with principles and aims of critical transformative education.

Introduction

In 2001 the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission, appointed by the government to review the tertiary education system, recommended *inter alia* that, ‘as a means of ensuring that the tertiary education system best contributes to the achievement of the national strategic goals, the priorities of the tertiary strategy should be to ... *build stronger bridges into tertiary education*, through better integration of foundation education into the system’ (Tertiary Education Advisory Commission, 2001: 6). Government accepted this and the Tertiary Education Strategy for 2002-2007 included the following as one of its six key strategies:

¹ In Robert Tobias, Liz Tully, Philippa Beckman, and Lorraine Petelo (Editors), ‘Learning Transitions’, UC Opportunity, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, May 2006 : pp 106

‘Strategy Three: Raise Foundation Skills so that All People can Participate in our Knowledge Society - Improving foundation skills (literacy, numeracy and other basic skills), will ensure that more New Zealanders are able to participate effectively in the economic and social benefits of our vision for national development’ (Office of the Associate Minister of Education (Tertiary Education), 2002: 14).

This strategy was elaborated on through a series of objectives that included the following:

‘By 2007, New Zealand’s tertiary education system will encompass a well-integrated system of foundation education provision, so that a range of clearly-identified pathways is available for learners to acquire foundation skills... Adults and youth who have not gained key foundation skills through the compulsory schooling system will in future be able to access quality foundation education programmes in contexts and settings relevant to them – including their family, work, an institution, their local communities, schools, churches and marae.

‘By 2007, we will have achieved improvements in the number and diversity of learners accessing and succeeding in obtaining foundation skills through the tertiary sector, particularly amongst priority groups with lower literacy levels, including Maori, Pacific, migrants, refugees, ‘at risk’ youth, long-term unemployed, learners with disabilities, and those with few or no qualifications’ (Office of the Associate Minister of Education (Tertiary Education), 2002: 37)

As far as universities were concerned it was stated that:

‘Universities will respond to this priority area by engaging in research about foundation skills acquisition, training teachers and tutors of foundation skill delivery and assessment, and supporting learners to staircase into their higher-level qualifications through bridging courses or links with foundation education providers. Foundation skills providers will ensure their learners pathway onto further education where appropriate, and will generally pay attention to the post completion needs of learners and employers throughout the system to get maximum value from the education’ (Office of the Associate Minister of Education (Tertiary Education), 2002: 41).

This paper engages with aspects of this objective. However, its canvas is broader as it raises questions about the understandings of foundation education implicit in government policy. Drawing on a variety of sociological traditions, the paper explores the nature and role of those forms of tertiary education that have been variously described as ‘transition’, ‘foundation’ and ‘bridging’ education.

It is important to recognise that young people and adults make their own transitions and construct their own bridges in a variety of contexts, and a variety of formal, non-formal and informal education programmes incorporate transitional elements and provide bridges to new possibilities. However, in this paper the term ‘transition education’ is used to refer to all forms of ‘access’ and ‘foundation’ education, including English-language programmes that enable speakers of other languages to study at tertiary education institutions in New Zealand. It also refers to ‘bridging’ programmes. Benseman and Ross note that, ‘The term *bridging education* is interpreted in a diversity of ways, but generally refers to programmes aimed at giving learners the requisite academic skills that will enable them to enrol in other tertiary programmes to which they would not otherwise have been able to gain entry’ (Benseman and Ross, 2003: 45).

This paper argues that much of the theory and research underpinning policy and practice in transition education is grounded implicitly or explicitly in technicist and liberal functionalist discourses. Under capitalism the discourses of liberal functionalism generally assume the desirability of a market model of society and, in many instances, endorse the application of a market model to education (the ‘commodification’ of education). Within these discourses emphasis has often been placed on the testing, diagnosis and ‘treatment’ or instruction of those alleged to have learning difficulties or skill deficits and the development of programmes to manage the learning behaviours of individual learners. It has also been argued that the transition journey is a necessary and desirable one for those who may have ‘failed’ or ‘dropped out of’ school’ or who may be unemployed and have few if any educational or occupational qualifications recognised in the labour market.

Alternatively, as far as international students are concerned, the development of such programmes has been seen as a necessary part of the global market in tertiary education. Within these discourses it is difficult to pose critical questions about the fundamental social, cultural, economic and political nature of the educational process

and about the ways in which such programmes may support increasing inequalities within New Zealand and globally. By way of contrast, this paper argues that transition education may more usefully be informed by a range of critical theories – theories that conceptualise transition education as a form of critical practice.

Liberal functionalist discourses

Much of the literature on transition education is grounded implicitly or explicitly in technicist and liberal functionalist discourses. This is especially the case in North America (Rubenson, 1989) but is also true of relevant literature in other countries. Almost 50 years ago two distinguished British sociologists, Jean Floud and A. H. Halsey, working within a functionalist tradition, suggested that at various times adult education programmes have served ‘... at least four distinguishable functions: remedial, assimilative, mobility-promoting and compensatory’ (Floud and Halsey, 1958: 191). Although no individual programme could unequivocally be seen as fulfilling only one function, they suggested that adult education programmes in general had arisen as functional responses to changes in the technology, the polity, the economy and the social structure of various countries at different times.

Floud and Halsey suggested that programmes fulfilling remedial functions had arisen when rapid technological or social change led to a demand for higher levels of knowledge and skill in the labour market, or more generally in society, or higher levels of certification. Secondly, programmes fulfilling assimilative functions had arisen when the dominant economic, political, social and cultural patterns and institutions were under threat or when it was considered necessary to absorb new groups of people (eg more members of the working class, migrants, etc.) within mainstream institutions. Thirdly, programmes promoting social and occupational mobility had often emerged out of those with remedial and assimilative functions. They argued that this mobility-promotion function underlay the vitality of many contemporary forms of credentialed education. Fourthly, they argued that programmes fulfilling compensatory functions arose out of increasing work-pressures and pressures of specialisation, when increasing numbers of ‘... individuals are...likely to suffer from deficient or unbalanced satisfaction of intellectual and emotional needs’ (Floud and Halsey, 1958: 192). Finally, seemingly in somewhat utopian fashion, they proposed the general

hypothesis “... that the advance of industrialism shifts the focus of adult education from remedial and assimilative work to the promotion of mobility and the provision of compensatory or 'recreative' experience” (Floud and Halsey, 1958: 192).

The application of this liberal functionalist framework to the field of transition education is fairly evident. The strength of some of the sociological work within a liberal functionalist discourse lies in its focus on the social nature of human actions that cannot be understood exclusively in individualistic terms. In general, many transition programmes can readily be seen to fulfil remedial and mobility-promotion functions. These include many adult literacy, foundation and employment-related programmes, bridging programmes, and programmes designed to upgrade people's technological skills.

The assimilation functions of many transition programmes may not be so immediately apparent. However, programmes designed to promote adult entry to universities have traditionally attempted to ensure that prospective students are assimilated effectively within the culture of universities. The assimilationist functions of Maori educational policies and programmes have been widely documented (Harrison, 1992; Simon, 1992; Sullivan, 1993; Walker, 2004). Programmes for refugees and other immigrants have also served assimilative functions. It may also be argued that one of the functions of Training Opportunities and other employment-related programmes has been to assimilate unemployed people within the workforce.

As suggested by Floud and Halsey, the functions of promoting social and occupational mobility may be seen as growing out of the remedial and assimilation functions. In the case of transition programmes, the mobility promoting functions have been carried out both locally and on a global scale. In the UK Hopper and Osborn (1976) elaborated on the Floud and Halsey framework by focusing specifically on the social control and social selection functions of education. On the basis of their study of adult students they suggested that a key function of adult education was to 'correct errors' in the processes of initial selection and role allocation within the school system. In Aotearoa the development of transition programmes allowing for re-entry to secondary and tertiary education of young people and adults who left school early can be seen as fulfilling a similar function. Globally, the various programmes designed for international students are clearly intended to provide opportunities for social and occupational mobility.

Within the functionalist framework set out by Floud and Halsey it seems that formally constituted transition programmes have little if any role to play in relation to the proposed compensatory function. This function is left to be served by other forms of adult and tertiary education. Whether or not such a sharp division of functions is necessary or desirable is a question that must remain open for the present. It could be argued that every attempt should be made to reduce the sharp edges between different programme areas and types. This would encourage people who may not see themselves as needing remedial work, or who may reject assimilationist notions, to engage in other forms of adult and community education. It would also encourage movement by people from adult and community education into formally designated transition programmes.

Critical discourses

Researchers and educators drawing on critical and radical traditions have identified a number of limitations inherent in liberal functionalism and its applications to education (Allman, 2001; Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1983; Mayo and Thompson, 1995; Peters, Olssen, and Lankshear, 2003; Wangoola and Youngman, 1996; Welton, 1995). They have voiced a number of criticisms which are summarised below (???)

One criticism is that liberal functionalism fails to raise questions about structured inequalities in the distribution of power in society, and the role of education in maintaining and reproducing these power relations. It therefore lacks a critical perspective. These inequalities, and the role of education in relation to them, have tended to be seen as natural, unproblematic and frequently functional. By way of contrast, critical theorists argue that structured inequalities are not natural or inevitable. Rather, they are highly problematic and arise out of imperatives within the dominant discourses in each particular historical period. Critical theorists argue that although hegemonic forms, policies and practices of education play a key role in reproducing and legitimating dominant ideologies, educators can, and should, promote and engage in counter-hegemonic practices including those which contribute to movements seeking to question and challenge the legitimacy of dominant discourses.

Secondly, liberal functionalism has failed to address issues arising out of imperialism and colonialism and their impact, together with patriarchal and capitalist structures, on

shaping dominant forms and practices of tertiary and transition education. Kjell Rubenson (1989) and others have pointed out that many programmes do little if anything to challenge the dominant ideologies in society or to effect change in the structures of inequality.

Thirdly, liberal functionalism has failed to address questions about the ways in which the forces of global capitalism have shaped dominant forms and practices of education, including transition education. By way of contrast, it has been argued that global capitalism over the last few decades has brought about the increasing commodification of tertiary education generally, and transition education in particular. Public and private English Language Schools working alongside governments, public and private education institutions, and international testing agencies have played a role in this. Commodification of tertiary education has also meant the expansion of managerialism and increasing demands for ever-more-specific short-term measurement of outcomes for educational programmes, and forms of assessment to be 'market-driven' and paid for by 'clients and customers' rather than by the state. A consequence of this has been the demand for greater 'efficiencies in the delivery of programmes'. This has impacted on labour processes and labour relations within tertiary education in general and transition education in particular, increasing workloads on teachers and increasing the use of assembly-line methods of teaching.

Another criticism of liberal functionalism is that it frequently accords a greater degree of autonomy to adult and transition education, along with a greater capacity to bring about social change, than may generally be warranted (Rubenson, 1989). Some programmes of adult education, it is argued, do contribute to social change. However, these social change-oriented programmes are few and far between. Many programmes of adult and transition education developed in recent years perform welfarist functions or functions closely related to the rapidly changing demands of the globalised labour market, while others serve functions very similar to those of formal schooling. In fact, these programmes may be more accurately reconceptualised as extensions into the adult years of the cultural reproduction, legitimation, social control, and labour market allocation functions associated with schooling (Courtney, 1992: 123-147).

Liberal functionalism can also be seen as failing to recognise that there have been programmes of critical pedagogy that have played a key role in the struggles of oppressed and exploited peoples to challenge the dominant ideologies in society and to

effect change in exploitative structures (Delahunty, 2003; Foley, 1999; Freire, 1972; Horton, 1989; Korndorffer, 1990; Newman, 1994; Shor, 1987; Stalker, 2003; Tobias, 2000). Liberal functionalism has failed to take into account the contradictions which exist from time to time in all social formations - contradictions which give rise to tensions, which may in turn be exploited by progressive forces to promote counter-hegemonic critical education and action. It has drawn attention away from the ways in which individuals, groups and movements have sought to challenge ideologies promoted by dominant classes and groups to create their own programmes.

Critics have also argued that liberal functionalism has failed to raise questions concerning the problematic nature of the curriculum in many contexts. Attention has been drawn away from the essentially political questions: What counts as legitimate or important knowledge? And who decides this question? In the 1970s the so-called 'new sociology' (Bates, 1978; Young, 1971) introduced an approach to understanding curriculum issues which took into account the effects of the relations of power. This approach, which is still relevant today, rests on attempts to throw light on questions such as:

What counts as knowledge and how is it produced? How is what counts as knowledge organised? How is what counts as knowledge communicated? How is access to what counts as knowledge determined? What are the processes of control? What ideological appeals justify the system?

In the 1980s similar questions were used by Brian Findsen to analyse the curriculum in a 'transition' programme - the Certificate in Maori Studies at the University of Waikato (Findsen, 1992). Other researchers over the past two decades of widespread neo-liberal reforms have continued to raise critical questions concerning the curriculum (Jackson, 1993, 1994, 1995). They have revived radical 19th century distinctions between knowledge which is 'really useful' and knowledge which is 'merely useful' or 'useless' (Johnson, 1988) and have pointed out that curricula can never be neutral and can best be understood as manifestations of the ways in which knowledge and power are socially constructed and organised.

From this perspective many educational programmes, policies and practices can be seen as explicitly or implicitly contributing to the maintenance and reproduction of the dominant relations of knowledge and power and the modes of production, distribution

and exchange of economic, social and cultural products and services in society. This includes many of those programmes intended to provide learning transitions and bridges for adults and young people into the workplace or into study at universities or other tertiary institutions (Korndorffer, 1990, 1987). Educational policies and programmes thus constitute a ‘contested terrain’ (Jackson and Jordan, 2000) and key questions include: Whose interests are served by which forms of curriculum and which credentials? Who benefits and who loses from new developments in tertiary education including transition programmes?

Implications and suggestions for policy and practice

It is not my intention to suggest that any particular set of policies and practices can invariably be identified exclusively with liberal functionalism. Critical educators may draw on some insights from the adult education literature, and liberal educators who reject the political and social action dimensions of critical education discourses may nevertheless draw on aspects of critical and radical theory to inform their policies and practices. Nevertheless, there are important distinctions between the two discourses. While critical educators look first at the political dimension of any learning and teaching programme, liberal educators generally feel uncomfortable with this primary focus, preferring to focus on technical and personal factors or on the ostensibly neutral demands of subjects or disciplines.

This section draws on a range of discourses to highlight implications arising from the previous discussion and to make suggestions for policy and practice. Not all of these are unique to critical and radical traditions. Indeed, some of the themes are drawn from the general adult education literature. Firstly, I highlight some of the roles required of transition educators and suggest ways in which they may support learners. Secondly, I emphasise the importance of ensuring that the expectations of both learners and educators are clarified. Thirdly, I draw attention to a number of key aspects of the learning environment that require the attention of educators.

Key supportive roles of transition educators

The adult education literature (Brookfield, 2000; Brookfield, 1995; Foley, 2000; Heron, 1989; A. Rogers, 2002; J. Rogers, 2001; Tennant, 1997) suggests that

educators need to be able to perform a wide range of roles. These include facilitative, organisational, informative, narrative and interpretative roles as well as the roles of convenor, recorder, mentor, mediator and advocate. In addition, in many circumstances, transition educators may usefully see their main role as being akin to that of a good host. Like a good host, the educator should:

- be primarily concerned with making the learners (or guests) feel at home – which may require careful planning and forethought
- treat the learners as friends and equals, avoiding power-plays and any behaviour that may be interpreted as patronising
- encourage learners to draw on personal experiences and tell their own stories
- have a genuine sense of humour
- make the learners feel comfortable physically, emotionally and intellectually, as well as stimulated and challenged
- plan the hospitality carefully to take account of the expectations and preferences of learners

The challenge for educators is to combine the requirements of the role of host with the many other roles required of a professionally competent teacher.

The importance of developing clear expectations

To ensure that the educational process fulfils the expectations of both learners and educators, those expectations should be clarified through formal or informal negotiation. Among other matters, the negotiation process may explore:

- the backgrounds, experiences and expectations of both learners and educators
- the relevance of personal, family and cultural histories and biographies to the relationship
- visions, ideals, understandings, and forms and areas of expertise, and
- any external requirements and expectations

At the same time educators need to ensure that learners have access to information on available resources and are aware of relevant decision-making processes and how to participate in these processes.

Aspects of an environment for effective learning

In order to develop their own understandings and skills, as well as those of their students, transition educators should develop their capacity to facilitate learning. To this end, they should:

- create a friendly and supportive environment in which people are encouraged to take risks, gain in self-confidence and develop the capacity to explore and acquire new insights, perceptions, skills, knowledge and understandings
- create a stimulating and questioning environment in which people feel free to challenge themselves and one another
- help and encourage students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to set realistic goals for themselves
- treat students at all times without condescension as mature and responsible adults
- develop and use a range of learning and teaching methods, techniques, devices and resources that build on and make use of previous experience and enable students to achieve and (where appropriate) transcend their goals and purposes
- be able and willing to give constructive positive and negative feedback to both students and colleagues on a regular basis, as well as to receive such feedback from them

The impact of wider contexts and discourses on learning and teaching

This section discusses themes that go beyond most liberal functionalist discourses. Drawing on the literature of critical and radical education, it presents suggestions for policy and practice that need to be considered if transition and foundation education is to move beyond amelioration and become an important form of emancipatory and transformative critical practice. Firstly, it highlights the important role of context in shaping programmes and the need for critical educators to confront the forces arising out of the wider social, economic, political and cultural context. Secondly, it draws attention to issues concerning the control of the curriculum and suggests some ways in

which critical educators can address these issues of power and control. Thirdly, it presents an important set of principles of critical transformative education. Such principles are necessary if critical educators are to work towards social transformation.

Critical and radical traditions highlight the fact that the purposes and processes of all forms of transition education are profoundly affected by the wider context in which they take place. In other words, they are located within and shaped by wider discourses. These include the demands of global capitalism and imperialism; and other social, economic, political and cultural forces which substantially influence ideologies and practices associated with gender relations, ethnicity and race relations, sexual orientation and identity, disability, religious affiliation, and age and ageism.

It is important for critical educators to be aware of these influences, and to take advantage of contradictions contained in many of them, if we are to promote a range of progressive and critical practices. It must be recognised that transition programmes can never be politically neutral. Any process of programme development and teaching reflects society's dominant assumptions and expectations about power and knowledge. It also reflects both the structures of power and the personal relations of power. Rather than allowing these underlying influences and forces to operate without their conscious awareness, programme coordinators and teachers should make a point of periodically reflecting on how these influences affect the curriculum, including the 'hidden' curriculum, and the methods of teaching and learning in their programmes. In addition, they should encourage participants to engage both separately and together with them in similar forms of reflection.

Control of the curriculum

In addition to examining the impact of the influences arising out of the wider social contexts, the literature also highlights the importance of being aware of a range of curriculum and control issues within the programmes themselves (Bates, 1978; Young, 1971, Finsen, 1992)). One way of engaging with several key issues would be to respond collectively to the following questions:

- What counts as knowledge and how is it produced? (The focus is on what counts as legitimate or important knowledge or skill within the programme,

and what forms of knowledge and skill are seen as illegitimate or unimportant, and how these decisions are made.)

- How is what counts as knowledge organised? (The focus is on the organisation of the curriculum and programme and raises questions about the degree of openness and flexibility of the programme.)
- How is what counts as knowledge communicated? (The focus is on the nature of learner-tutor interactions, methods of teaching and learning, and access by learners to resources.)
- How is access to what counts as knowledge determined? (The focus is on explicit and implicit mechanisms used to include some learners and exclude others. These include admission criteria and policies, language policies, methods of promotion and publicity, and fees and other cost structures.)
- What are the processes of control? (The focus is on ways in which different forms of knowledge exercise different forms of control. For example, academic knowledge exercises its own particular forms of social control through its emphasis on formal literacy, individualism, abstractness and unrelatedness of academic curricula which often are 'at odds with' daily life and common experience.)
- What ideological appeals justify the system? (The focus is on the underlying ideas used to justify the programme.)

Other key questions which focus on the social organisation of knowledge and highlight the contested nature of the curriculum include the following:

- Whose interests are served by which forms of curriculum and which credentials?
- Who benefits and who loses from new developments in tertiary education?

Principles and aims of critical education

Finally, if transition educators are to work in ways that move beyond amelioration and promote critical practice they need to implement practices that accord with principles of critical transformative education. As previously indicated, a number of

radical and critical educators have discussed these principles. One important recent example is provided by Paula Allman. In a series of publications (Allman, 1999, 2001) she has drawn on Freire, Gramsci and Marx to suggest a number of principles of ‘critical transformative education’ including:

- ‘dialogical praxis’ involving the integration of critical learning, discussion and action by educators and learners acting together as equals
- a commitment to learning to ‘read the world’ critically and to transforming the conventional, hegemonic or dominant and pervasive educational relations
- vigilance with regard to one’s own processes of self-transformation and adherence to the principles and aims of the group
- a commitment on the part of the educator to honesty and truth
- a commitment to work for the establishment of mutual respect, humility, openness, trust and cooperation on the part of educators and learners
- a commitment to work with passion to achieve the aims stated below

Her aims include:

- the development of critical, creative and hopeful thinking
- the transformation of self and the social relations of learning and teaching
- democratisation
- embracing and internalising the principles referred to above

Allman argues on the basis of her teaching experience that these principles and aims of critical education can be applied to all forms of education.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that ‘transition’, ‘foundation’ or ‘bridging’ education can most usefully be understood as forms of critical practice. These programmes may be understood to be critical in two senses.

- Firstly, they form a crucial or decisive component of tertiary education policy. Let there be no mistake about this. Although people make transitions in all forms of educational programmes, many would undoubtedly miss important educational opportunities if programmes designated to provide or facilitate

transitions were not readily available. They can indeed play a crucial - if not decisive - role for some individuals and for society.

- Secondly, they may provide a transformative opportunity for learners to develop a critical understanding of the discourses within which they are located, and which influence their lives, prior experiences and expectations of education. They may also enable learners to develop their capacities to challenge hegemonic discourses.

This paper has critiqued liberal functionalist discourses that reduce transition education to serving largely an ameliorative function. This is evident in dominant discourses that describe the purpose of transition education as correcting the perceived 'deficits of individuals', or which interpret its function as 'raising foundation skills' or 'motivating' people to climb social and economic ladders and giving them the 'skills they need' to 'succeed'. All this may be done rather than challenging the composition of the ladders themselves and possibly looking at ways of transforming them (Tobias, 1999). The term 'foundation skills' should therefore be seen as problematic. For example, people who cannot read and write very well can be effective in the workplace, in the home and in public life, while many people who are highly literate may not be very competent in other spheres of life.

This paper has sought to move beyond the task of critical analysis. Drawing primarily on the literatures of critical and adult education, it has identified a number of suggestions for policy and practice. These should be considered if transition and foundation education is to move beyond amelioration and become an important form of emancipatory and transformative critical practice. They should not, however, be used in a doctrinaire fashion but as part of a process of open and critical dialogue and praxis.

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