A kaleidoscope of the mystic, the metaphorical and the mundane

A review of Wayne Hugo’s “Cracking the code to educational analysis” (Pearson, 2013)

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Careful study of learners, learning, teachers, curricula, etc. should inform the education professions. That seems reasonable. There are perhaps those who hope that if we go detailed enough, we can develop a set of educational ‘laws’ that are context-proof, teacher-proof and even learner-proof. In the search of such universal ‘laws,’ researchers and politicians look to Hong Kong and Korea where the curriculum to a large extent dictates pedagogy, or to Finland where it doesn’t and free play is revered, to find answers. But the complexity of teaching and learning in varying cultural contexts and circumstances always breaks through, to the wonder or frustration of the researcher or the manager.

It is this complexity which Wayne Hugo in some ways take as his starting point, yet refuses to be daunted by. His book “Cracking the code to educational analysis” claims that it sets out to provide “a simple introduction that would enable an analysis of any educational situation in the world” (p. v). However, it is an analysis which despite being systematic opens up layers of descriptors, revealing both new complexities and new patterns of connections. It is a bit as my childhood’s kaleidoscope, where a handful of glass beads reflected in a few mirrors turned into an exquisite source of delight. A few elements combined in many ways to form what appeared to be entirely new patterns.

Thus, Hugo’s positioning of his book is not truthful. The book is not simple, it is much more than an introduction, and it is as much a practical book for people analysing education as it is a book for practitioners in education. And while the book mostly draws examples from school related contexts, Hugo is ambitious enough to want the descriptors he works with able to capture, as he says, “any educational situation”. This to the extent that the Zen Buddhist approach of slapping the perplexed disciple must be covered on equal footing with teaching the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus or even teaching pedagogy itself.

Perhaps this is too ambitious a project after all. In the attempt to provide a tool for an analysis which honours that context, teacher and learner always influence the situation, it is tempting to want a set of descriptors which can capture all possible ways of taking into account context, teacher and learner. However, this in itself could possibly limit the openness towards contexts and participants?

This almost philosophical concern should not distract from what the book does and can do. And what it does is provide structured layers for educational analysis, offering a systematic organization of much of what we know in education. It is in this sense that the book is not just an introduction to, but provides a new attempt at an overview of, education which is both “embedded firmly in the present and appreciates the past” (p. 64) in order to look forward.

The organization that the book provides for educational analysis is reflected in its own structure. The book is organized around eight questions concerning classification and framing of content and pedagogy, and two questions concerning educational systems. Starting with eight questions formulated in everyday language allows for easy entry into the book for any lay person (deceptively simple), and demonstrates various pedagogical principles in itself. It is Kierkegaard in essence, meeting the reader as a “you” who would share Hugo’s love of both knowledge and knower or come to do so by grabbling with these seemingly straight forward questions.

But even asking a set of questions together from the onset of the book, instead of one at a time, reflects the commitment to the complexity I mentioned above. It is not uncommon to operate with dichotomies, such as ‘learner-centered’ versus ‘teacher-centered’ pedagogy, and then position the one as ‘better’ in some respect than the other. At times, this is even done without reflecting on if it is ‘better’ in terms of ensuring the Catholic faith or ‘better’ in terms of scoring high on PISA, and for whom it is ‘better’. In contrast, by insisting from the very start on operating with more dimensions, Hugo opens up additional pedagogical worlds – and in the last chapters also to continuously moving between such worlds depending on context, teacher and learners: “The binary opens out to process” (p. 151). Even if the answer to each question is taken to operate within a dichotomy, the eight first questions alone give rise to 28 = 256 possible configurations. In other words, from the onset, we get a sense of how any judgement and choice by a teacher or curriculum developer bifurcates into more options to consider.

Then begins the Symposium. Each of the questions is interrogated in its own chapter, and opposing perspectives are given voice, but also critically engaged. But there is more to this than what perhaps meets the eye at first; as I see it, each chapter operates on four levels. Let me take chapter 4 on (framing of) *selection* of content as an example. The opening question is posed to the reader imagining to be a grade 8 science teacher: “Would you solidify the selection of knowledge by making clear what content is in and out, or would you open selection out to various potential content choices?” On the first level of engagement with the issue of selection, the question is illuminated with reference to extreme positions. Should selection be downwards or emergent, controlled by the most knowledgeable or by the learners themselves, and what are arguments for both?

Hugo tends to discuss the issues with examples from distant or recent history – in this case, Plato’s argument for downwards selection from highest principles and Mitra’s emergent selection of content as demonstrated through his “hole-in-the-wall open access computer” experiments. And as the chapter unfolds, Hugo also places Montessori and Eisner in the context of selection and swings the path through Reggio Emilia and Hirsch’s Core Knowledge Foundation. This operates as a second level of content in each chapter; supposedly exemplifying but also providing introductions to key authors and/or positions in the field of education (not to mention getting a few well-placed slaps in, in the process, such as that dealt to creationism (p. 62)). It is deepening the knowledge of the field through a narrative apparently organized to structure analysis but superbly doing much more – including functioning as a “Bernstein for dummies” book; something I personally appreciate.

The third level is even more implicit. As the contrasting of Plato and Mitra shows, Hugo is not scared of leading the moral and mystic dimensions (ladders of beauty to the Good, the True, to God) into one ring corner, placing the more mundane (learning how to download music or play computer games) into the other. Yet, it is supposedly left to the reader to contemplate whether the answer to the opening question depends on what we want the learners to learn, or what our moral or ideological position on education is. In other words, the normative dimension is not officially foregrounded – it is deliberately backgrounded until issues of content and pedagogy have been addressed (cf. footnote 59; p. 72). Yet while it is allegedly only hinted at as a dimension of choice, as in “divisions run deep, reaching right into how we see ourselves as human beings and as a society” (p. 58), Hugo does not refrain from making his own position around access to powerful esoteric knowledge clear, nor from evoking issues of unequal distribution of access. Moral and sociological issues are both motivations for the quest to understand educational dynamics better and compasses in engaging these dynamics.

Touching on, but not systematically engaging, the normative – could that be considered a weakness of the book? It certainly limits the explicit considerations to “internal” issues of choosing best practice, though the normative (or regulative discourse) discussion is, quite obviously, never far away. Others may disagree, but I think Hugo has made a pedagogically sound choice in focusing on the internal dynamics of education first, and the political-systemic issues later, while still having the latter implicit in the discussion of the former. As a result, educational ideologies or ‘orders of worth’ are not engaged here, but the issues are latently present and there are pointers to it planted everywhere. In my view, Hugo has managed to do so in a way which carefully balances selection from the esoteric domains, the classics so to speak, and giving the reader freedom in choosing which pointers to pursue. A sentence such as “Instead of making the highest level the Good, the Beautiful and the True, Bobbitt and Charters made it what expert adults do in the present” [that guided the curriculum] (p. 63), refers squarely to the key issue in curriculum design and its underlying ideological positions, and there is a world of knowledge to unravel hinted at here. The reader can decide to turn to Plato, read Bobbitt, or just take Hugo’s word for it.

The fourth level engaged in each chapter is when two dimensions are explicitly combined into a two by two grid of possibilities. At times, it’s using the extremes already introduced, as in chapter four. At other times, it’s drawing in new dimensions. For instance, chapter one does not simply contrast the disciplinary and the interdisciplinary approaches to content, but makes a distinction between specialized concepts and specialized combinations. This means that instead of two options, we have four: specialized concepts and specialized combinations, specialized combinations but unformalised concepts, and so forth. Thus, already after chapter 1, the 256 options created by considering the first eight questions has bifurcated on the next level of analysis to 512 options. And so forth. In chapter four, it’s simply combining presence/absence of downwards selection and emergence in various ways. But the dichotomies are also abandoned, in recognition that the “zone of selecting what should be taught is a minefield of competing forces, logics and interests” (p. 65).

The danger of course is that this tight logic takes on a more absolutist role than is perhaps fair. It is tempting to see this well-structured, layered approach to educational analysis as highly inclusive of all relevant dimensions. This maybe even more so because of the clear situating of past educationalists and positions in the generated system of concepts and categories, not to mention the appealing visual metaphors used in conveying the proposed structures. Yet the readers should keep in mind that even in Hugo’s quadrants in each chapter, choices have been made about what to include and what to exclude. For instance, the chapter on selection remains sadly silent on the exemplarity principle as a way to engage the balance between downwards and emerging selection, or as a way to manage a balance between teaching core ideas, concepts, connections, and competencies of a specialization versus coverage of all content components.

So these are the four layers I see. All of this comes together in each chapter in clear directives for analysis of educational situations/’texts’. In chapter 4 this is done by Hugo by sequencing the questions to ask regarding selection:

… firstly work out whether there is downward selection pressure based on the demands of the specialization, or an explosion of emergent possibilities based on the availability of information. Bear in mind that this tension results in a debate between selecting for content and selecting for skills … Secondly, ask yourself whether … the downwards selection forces … or encourages [certain choices below]; or whether the emergent choice is a forced one … or allows for many possibilities.

Only once you learnt how to work with the basic forces of selection ask the radical and critical question – ‘What has been left out in the selection?’ (p. 71)

This of course fits with the declared purpose of the book, namely to be a – pedagogic – introduction to educational analysis. In other words aimed at novice researchers. But as I see it, it is also aimed at practitioners who want to develop the overarching theories through which to understand educational phenomena – a competency which Schön saw as a key characteristic of scientifically based professions. When Hugo states that “emphasizing critical thinking at the cost of knowledge results in a reduction of a child’s ability to think critically” (p. 69), he could just as well have been talking about the teacher. Understanding the possible choices regarding classification, framing and the next layer ‘down’, not to mention their interplay, is the knowledge that informs professional judgements, even as these must take into account contexts, teachers and learners. Any teacher who wishes to facilitate learning must in one way or other – except perhaps in the most rigid and regimented forms of curriculum - consider issues within the dimensions Bernstein introduced and Hugo has made more accessible. This book offers one entry into doing so more systematically. And I would recommend it highly to both entry level researchers and teachers.

That said, the richness of the book also produces a difficulty. It offers us a multitude of combinations within the classroom alone, and the same multitude replicated for the educational system. It shows how pedagogic discourse can reflect a fluidity amongst these combinations. And it rejects the distinction between progressive versus formalist pedagogies as useful, arguing instead for distinguishing between a minimal pedagogy (“that can only do one thing at one time in one way”, p. 153) and an optimal pedagogy (which “can do many things at many times in many ways”, ibidem). But while Hugo may be able to imagine educational potential in all of these combinations and the move between them, I cannot help but ask, “which combinations serve different purposes better?” The answer that the “ultimate pedagogic discourse must contain within itself both solid and open possibilities” (p. 151), embraces complexity and context-dependent choices, but it is perhaps a tad too open to be useful to any but the exceptional teacher.

The concluding chapter helps a bit with this. It hints at how the reader can explore these issues by taking one of the opening questions of the book and relating the others to it; a process which will then suggest certain “tendencies,” such as “hierarchical knowledge structures tend towards an open pacing line … and solid selection and sequencing lines at foundational levels” (pp. 160-1). But as Hugo’s subsequent discussion shows, these tendencies can be balanced in different ways, always relational and depending on contexts, participants and goals. Thus, the book points to the distinction between a minimal and an optimal pedagogy, but the road to travel between them is fraught with danger – though also ripe with opportunity. It is as practical as it is avoiding giving narrow practical directions. It is too easy to say that this is a weakness of the book, as it is too easy to say that it is a strength. It is a poetic possibility.

And perhaps that is the ultimate reason why I like the book. More than providing me with a systematic structure of concepts I can engage with my students, it provides a range of powerful images; visual, metaphorical, symbolic, and mystic. They become ways to playfully engage what often is seen as heavyset and inaccessible, and to capture complexities and variations. Some are more successful than others – personally, I prefer the ‘simpler’ diagrams – but most of them ‘work’. And let us not forget that they add great humour – a pedagogic trick that Hugo uses more than he discusses it. Who cannot smile, yet contemplate the meeting of ideas implied, when reading absurdities such as

The image I have in my mind is of Maria Montessori suddenly turning around and kissing Engelmann, and finding that the she actually quite likes the man, despite his goatee. (p. 151)