

Towards an ethics of engagement in education in global times

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Starting from the observation that patterns of educational inequality are widely known but largely invisible in public debates on education, this article argues for the importance of an ethics of education which challenges simple acceptance of 'things as they are'. It suggests possibilities for working with discourses of ethics, rights and citizenship in contingent and strategic ways, and argues for the importance of engaging ethically across difference in current global times. It proposes three interrelated dimensions for an ethics of engagement in education: an ethics of commitment to intellectual rigour; an ethics of civility; and an inter-human ethics of care.

Ethics refers to the practice of thinking about what living as a human subject in relation to fellow subjects and the world that they share demands of us. (Yeatman, 2004)

Framing the issues

Over the past 30 years, numerous studies in the sociology of education have confirmed that schools produce unequal outcomes for students of different social and cultural backgrounds. It is well known that achievement in school is closely linked to socioeconomic background and (in Australia) command of English and Indigeneity. It is also known that, under conditions of neo-liberal globalisation, new patterns of relevance and marginalisation are forming alongside these well-established contours of inequality. Social dislocation and social suffering are known to be widespread, even in relatively wealthy countries such as Australia. And there is readily available evidence of the conditions of poverty in which the majority of the people across the world live.

What is striking in current public debates around schooling is that these well-established inequalities are largely taken for granted; hardly a question is raised about their existence, let alone their persistence. The following four snapshots provide depictions of social suffering and inequality which are, to a large extent, left unresolved in public policy, including educational policy. The detail provided in the snapshots illustrates that there is ample evidence available.

First snapshot—a commentary from ABC *Lateline* on refugee children:

Children in detention suffer a 'living nightmare': study

A living nightmare—that is how life for children inside detention is being described. The first systematic study of mental health inside detention has found

a tenfold increase in psychiatric illness among children. Regular suicide attempts, violence between guards and detainees, verbal abuse, room searches and solitary confinement are just some of the traumas experienced by children. The study also records a shameful world first for Australia—the highest levels of mental illness among children ever recorded in modern medical literature (O’Neill, 2003).

As at 6 October 2004, there were still 84 children being held in immigration detention centres.

Second snapshot—an extract from an article on Indigenous survival and well-being in Australia:

Despite . . . [the] increase in participation across the board, the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school retention and attainment remain unsatisfactorily high . . . In 2001, one-quarter of all Indigenous Year 3 students and one-third of those in Year 5 did not reach the lowest acceptable levels in either English literacy or numeracy attainment. Only half the number of Indigenous students who had been enrolled in Year 10 in 1999 were enrolled in Year 12 two years later . . . While Indigenous young people reach age 15 without being sufficiently literate or numerate to gain quality employment, their options for the future remain severely limited. (Malin & Maidment, 2003, pp. 89–90)

Indigenous health has made no overall improvement over the last 10 years, with the mortality rate of Indigenous Australians being three times that of the total population. The disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy is 20 years. This is up to four times higher than the gaps in North America and New Zealand, which range from five to seven years. Although infant mortality rates for Indigenous Australians have improved, they still remain 2.5 times that of the total population . . . With such a high mortality rate many Indigenous families find themselves in perpetual mourning. (Malin & Maidment, 2003, p. 91)

Third snapshot—an extract from Teese and Polese’s (2003) study of Melbourne schools serving different socioeconomic communities:

Who succeeds and who fails, what is teachable and what is not, these are fundamental questions in an age of mass secondary education. The failure to investigate them in a continuing way allows the curriculum to stay closely aligned to its most successful users. Their investment in the curriculum as a machine of competition is great. The schools they patronise employ highly qualified and experienced staff, have well-stocked libraries and electronic data resources; they employ remedial teachers and counsellors, train their students in exam techniques, provide smaller classes, filter and stream their intakes, and offer optimum teaching conditions. By contrast, public investment in making the curriculum more socially inclusive [in poor schools] relies almost wholly on the willingness and ability of teachers acting in isolation, and often under adverse conditions, to compensate for weaknesses in student cultural capital, on the one side, and in curriculum design, on the other. (Teese & Polese, 2003, p. 197).

Fourth snapshot—two comments from the International Labour Organization’s (2004) report on globalisation:

... 22 industrialized countries representing only 14 per cent of the world's population dominate about half the world's trade and more than half of its foreign direct investment ... There are deep-seated and persistent imbalances in the current workings of the global economy, which are ethically unacceptable and politically unsustainable ... Seen through the eyes of the vast majority of men and women, globalization has not met their simple and legitimate aspirations for decent jobs and a better future for their children.

The question arises: If these patterns of inequality and social exclusion are so well known, why do they remain so invisible in current public policy debates, including debates on education? This raises what Bourdieu (2001) terms the paradox of doxa: that is 'the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural' (p. 1). This is very similar to Gramsci's (1971) notion of how hegemony actively works to constitute the boundaries of common sense, to make it seem as if there are no alternatives, even if existing conditions are recognised as less than ideal.

This article explores how we as educators might respond both to social suffering and social inequality in a liberal democratic society, and to the apparent indifference to it. The article argues for the importance of an ethics of education which challenges simple acceptance of 'things as they are'. Since education requires an engagement with the personal and social conditions of existence of both 'self' and 'other', it opens a wide range of ethical considerations. This article attempts to do no more than raise a few of these.

Approaching ethics

In clearing a space for ethical debate on education, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that the discursive terms I shall be using here are the staple fare of Western modernism. However, it is this very connection that I wish to disturb. Modernist discourses of ethics, humanity, rights and citizenship have an apparent universalism and certainty which belie their historically contingent forms. For example, classic liberal ethics commonly draws on Kantian notions of the autonomous, sovereign agent who exercises moral judgement through courageous reasoning (McIntyre, 1966/1998). In this logic, the distinctive feature of moral imperatives is that they should have universal application. In similar vein, Western discourses of education are saturated with assumptions of progress and development, of what is good and bad, normal and deviant. They are filled with universalist claims which cover over the partialities, inequalities and techniques of power that are structured into them. However, I would argue that these discourses cannot simply be set aside in favour of some other, as yet unspoken, discourse which avoids their historical legacies, power relationships and subject positions. Instead, the task is to work with and against these discourses, to find their points of fracture, their cracks and fragilities, as opportunities for engaging with resistance, as points of departure for alternative action, as places for reworking matrices and strategies of power.

Thus, though a strong postmodern position eschews all work with foundational categories, I would argue that it is possible to engage with these discourses in contingent ways that recognise their human construction and their radical provisionality and incompleteness. Chakrabarty (2000) illustrates this well in his discussion of political modernity from a postcolonial perspective. He notes that Western political concepts such as citizenship, civil society, social justice and human rights 'entail an unavoidable—and in a sense indispensable—universal and secular vision of the human' (p. 4). However, he continues, that while these concepts are indispensable, they are also inadequate in their modernist, Western forms. They are not stable and singular in meaning, and their political history shows them to be contested and hybrid in practice.

Grosz (1994) illustrates that it is possible to work strategically with concepts like essentialism without endorsing epistemological foundationalism. Similarly, Butler's (1995) work on 'universalism' argues for a contingent use of foundationalist categories. As she points out, all theories incessantly posit foundations; 'foundations function as the unquestioned and unquestionable within any theory' (Butler, 1995, p. 39). Rather than doing away with categories like 'universalism', the task is to expose them as contingent and contestable, to render them 'permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent, in order not to foreclose in advance future claims for inclusion' (Butler, 1995, p. 41). In the Australian context, the work of Yeatman (1994) powerfully illustrates the spaces that may be opened by poststructuralist political theorising.

Recognising theory as perspectivalist, historical and discursive in nature (see Yeatman, 1994) does not necessarily entail extreme forms of anti-humanist post-structuralism and radical anti-foundationalism—a point well made by Said (2004) in his critical engagement with humanism. With Said, I am interested in human agency and action in the shaping of human history, in its material as well as ideational forms. Said (2004) states:

... as a fair degree of my own political and social activism has assured me, people all over the world can be and are moved by ideals of justice and equality—the South African victory in the liberation struggle is a perfect case in point—and the affiliated notion that humanistic ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for instance, and to try to overturn despotism and tyranny, both strike me as ideas that are alive and well. (p. 10)

The ethics of education that I am proposing here is premised on an acknowledgement of, and respect for, the intricate textures and meanings of human lives in social context, time and place. I am concerned to work with ethics not as a set of abstracted principles or universal precepts, but as the forms in which human beings think and act in relation to others. (Campbell and Shapiro (1999) refer to this an ethics of the encounter.) Human activity is filled with contingency and petty circumstances, with emotions and confusion, as well as with hopes and ideals, grand schemes, policies and power plays of all sorts. Issues of human good and harm, of values and morals are part of this activity. Accounting for the wide array of human activities is the substance of theory in the social sciences and humanities. And

learning to work with theory, argument and evidence is a central activity in education. What I am arguing for here is the importance of holding in tension a sense of the texture of everyday life and its human creation with the myriad theories and narratives that speak it, and within this, making space for ethical considerations. On this basis, the challenge is to work with categories such as ethics, humanity, rights and citizenship in contingent rather than foundationalist ways, towards a more socially just education system.

Towards an ethics for education

Having outlined some of the assumptions on which my analysis is based, I now return to the theme of this article: 'Towards an ethics of engagement in education in global times'. As set out in the quote from Yeatman at the start of this article, ethics may be understood as ways of thinking and acting in relation to others. Yeatman (2004) continues:

To open ourselves to ethical demands is to open ourselves to the challenge of thinking well and in ways that make our thoughtful engagement with the human condition both open and accountable to our contemporaries as fellow co-existents. It means being willing to listen to their objections to how we have represented the demands ethics poses for us and them, and when we have listened to those objections, to reconsider our position and to continue to engage in the dialogue with these interlocutors.

This approach to ethics does not entail a search for universal rules for good and bad behaviour. Rather, it entails a preparedness to think about ourselves as human beings in relation to others. This has a particular salience in current times, I would argue, for two major reasons. The first is that in current times, social identities are heightened in exclusivist ways, and crude notions of 'us and them' and 'good and evil' are implicated globally in acts of war and terror. An important step is to recognise that while Eurocentric assumptions are central to global political debates, they are themselves partial, and narrow universalisms may limit cosmopolitan engagement. An ethics of engagement means being open to others, not, as Said puts it, in a 'laissez-faire, feel-good multiculturalism', but in 'a far more rigorous intellectual and rational approach ... to offer resistance to the great reductive and vulgarising us-versus-them thought patterns of our time' (Said, 2004, p. 50). 'Learning to live together', identified as one of UNESCO's four pillars of learning, is crucial to an ethics of engagement in current global times, where the violence of war and terror cannot be ignored.

A second significant feature of current times is the hegemony of neo-liberal thinking. Politically and economically, neo-liberalism has become a powerful global discourse, which reverberates in schooling, as in other social policies, with complex consequences. It elevates the market as the best arbiter of social values, and individual choice as more important than a collective, common good. Discourses of schooling increasingly emphasise market choice, 'user pays' and individualised performance. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that inequalities and social suffering, such as those outlined at the start of this article, are rendered invisible, as matters of individual responsibility rather than of social concern. In

an economic rationalist climate where test scores, league tables and budget lines are taken as indicators of excellence, it is increasingly difficult to promote agendas of equity and social justice—but arguably this is more necessary than ever. It is particularly important to work on this terrain to set the terms of accountability in ways which build the deeper educational and ethical purposes of schooling. A necessary move is to work against discourses that set up individual interests in competition with and at the expense of a common good.

Patterns of state funding in the complex alignment of public and private schools are pertinent here. Funding the private system at the expense of state schooling is highly likely to lead to the residualisation of the state system and of particular schools within it that become places for those who cannot exercise choice. This cements in predictable ways the link between socioeconomic background, school performance and the distribution of life chances—and consciously undoes the patterns of social support for education built up in the last decades by the welfare state. Yet a return to the past is unlikely, and nostalgia may hamper the critical reflection needed to assess legacies of the past in the current provision of schooling. Thinking differently about the public/private dispensation in schooling, and about the academic curriculum which is the arbiter of success and failure, is an enormous challenge. It is not simply a matter of valourising a state system of education. It is also a matter of building a state system which the public regards as valuable, and which provides space for parental choice and influence which have been emphasised in moves towards the private system. Engaging with public values around the purposes of schooling is an important task for communities of educators as well as for public intellectuals—a point I return to later. My concern at this point is to establish that an ethics of engagement in education is important if social inequalities and social suffering are to be acknowledged and addressed.

It goes without saying that education is a values-based activity, and that schools both build and reflect the values of their broader societies. However, I would argue that it is necessary to go beyond this minimal recognition towards a set of positive propositions about ethics and education. What I propose here is a set of three interrelated dimensions for an ethics of engagement in education:

- an ethics of commitment to intellectual rigour in which we continually strive to understand and engage with complex social processes;
- an ethics of civility in which we actively build the conditions for a democratic public space;
- an ethics of care in which we acknowledge the significance of our care of the other, prior to any concerns for reciprocity or mutual obligation.

Each of these will be addressed in turn.

An ethics of intellectual rigour

In a misleadingly simple formulation, the Coalition of Essential Schools has as its first principle that schools should focus on helping students to ‘use their minds well’ (see Sizer, 1992). This entails an attitude of mind on the part of both teachers and students that is prepared to grapple continuously to understand why it is that our societies are configured as they are, why ‘unacceptable conditions of existence’

continue to exist, and how we should respond to them. In this vein, Bourdieu (1990) argues for cognitive struggle against the taken-for-granted, commonsense of habitus; the habitus, he says, may be '*controlled* through awakening of consciousness and socioanalysis' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 116, original emphasis). Similarly, Gramsci (1971) talks of the social constitution of consciousness, and the need to grapple intellectually to make good sense out of commonsense. In his words, 'The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory' (p. 324).

This is not to advocate a particular political or theoretical position; rather it is to argue for an intellectual vigilance and integrity in addressing such issues. It is to argue for the ethical importance of an education which challenges students to be informed and aware, to weigh up evidence and argument, to engage with difficult and complex issues and emotions, to develop their own views in thoughtful ways, and to change them when appropriate. It entails recognising the human construction of knowledge, and a preparedness to work with the power/knowledge nexus. Though I have termed this 'intellectual rigour', I do not assume that cognitive learning is the only form that this takes. For example, Bourdieu's (1990, 2001) notion of habitus suggests embodied learning—unconscious as well as conscious. Similarly, Gramsci's (1971) 'infinity of traces without an inventory' evocatively suggests that there may be many ways in which we come to 'know', and that indeed, we may never totally know. Knowledge of the self—both personal and social—is not a finite task that yields certainties. On the contrary, it is a continuing willingness to expose ourselves to the partialities of our own knowledge, the limitations of our own perspectives, our dislocations and dissonances, the strangers that we sometimes are to ourselves.

There is another approach to the issue of intellectual engagement, and that is, to recognise that schools are the only social institutions that have as their central purpose the formalised transmission of knowledge, skills and values. The central purpose of schooling, simply put, is teaching and learning. In *Leading Learning* (2003), Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie argue that a major focus of schools should be on the academic and social learning of *all* students—including those disadvantaged by poverty, marginalised by difference and surrounded by violence. We argue that academic learning needs to engage students critically and analytically with different knowledges, including those knowledges that are being destabilised and reconstituted in global times. As Seddon (2003) points out, current times require consideration of both universalistic abstract knowledges and particularistic, contextualised knowledges. Education for participation in the knowledge economy (however this may be understood and debated) entails building new skills, knowledges and social competences (see Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2003; Peters, 2001). In addition, it requires an ethical commitment to working with the complexities of current times.

The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2005; The School of Education, 2001) identified four dimensions of 'productive pedagogies' that make a difference to student learning

outcomes: intellectual quality, supportive classroom environments, engagement with difference, and connectedness to the world beyond the classroom. The argument made in the QSRLS is that *all* students are deserving of such learning, and that academic and social outcomes are both important. (These debates are well addressed in the edited collection *Rethinking Public Education: Towards a public curriculum* (2003) by Reid and Thomson.) However, our work also supports the findings of Teese and Polesel (2003) in *Undemocratic Schooling*, that disadvantaged schools may well be able to provide socially supportive environments for their students, but struggle to provide learning experiences of intellectual quality. Yet, it is just these students who most need schools to provide them with opportunities to engage in knowledge that is not available to them in their homes and neighbourhoods.

The original Coleman Report of 1966 quite clearly stated that characteristics of schooling—facilities, curriculum and teachers—made the most difference for low achieving students and those who came to school least prepared in terms of the demands of schooling. The implication was clear: *it is for the most disadvantaged children that improvements in school quality will make the most difference in achievement*. Furthermore, the feature of schooling found to have the most important effect on achievement for all students was good teachers. Again, their effect was greatest on children whose backgrounds were most educationally disadvantaged. And again, the Report stated a clear implication: ‘a given investment in upgrading teacher quality will have the most effect on achievement in underprivileged areas’ (Coleman et al., 1966, p. 317).

There is a tension here in expecting schools to make a difference to students in disadvantaged circumstances, while simultaneously acknowledging that, as Bernstein (1971) succinctly stated, schools cannot compensate for society. This tension cannot be sidestepped by blaming individuals or blaming schools; it needs to be continuously engaged with so that schools can work towards their central mandate, which is to provide systematic opportunities for learning. It is ultimately a responsibility of the government to provide a sound policy framework and adequate funding for schools; and it is the responsibility of a democratic citizenry to demand this of its government. An important role for communities of educators in a democratic polity is to engage in broader public debate about the ethics of education as part of a common good that societies build in order for their members to live together.

That said, it is important not to assume a deficit approach in focusing on those who are on the social margins of schooling. The kind of counter-hegemonic thinking advocated by Bourdieu (1990) and Gramsci (1971) applies equally to those with social power, and it is often the most privileged who question least—and simply take for granted—the conditions of existence of themselves and others.

An ethics of civility

In recent work, Balibar (2001) has explored the themes of citizenship and civility. Civility, for Balibar, is what makes politics possible: ‘the set of conditions within

which politics as a collective participation in public affairs is possible or is not made absolutely impossible' (p. 15). It is important to recognise that civility—a precondition for collective engagement in public life—is fragile, requires nurturing, and should not be taken for granted.

There are many instances of the fragility of civility in current times. For example, although it runs counter to Western democratic traditions (and particularly Westminster traditions) to condone lying by those holding high public office, this has become normalised post-9/11, and is most grossly evident in the saga of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Holding asylum seeker children in detention, as Australia has done, is a violation of the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory. An Australian Senate Commission of Inquiry found that politicians had lied around the Children Overboard issue, with public acceptance. The torture and detention of prisoners deemed to be outside of the Geneva Convention at Guantanamo Bay is conducted and condoned by an alliance of states who claim to uphold democratic civility. These are acts that violate the human rights of others; but they are also acts which erode the democratic claims of those who carry them out. These are acts which destroy possibilities for collective engagement in the face of serious differences between people at a global level; they run completely counter to the 'thoughtful engagement with the human condition' (Yeatman, 2004) which democracy at its best enables.

Maintaining the conditions for participation in public affairs is a task that goes to the core of democracy. And it is a task that education rightly addresses. At its best, the education process is about creating learning environments that help students make sense of their world in ways that will enable them to change it for the better, for both themselves and others. In *Leading Learning*, Lingard et al. (2003) describe these as resources for hope—resources to shape a world in which we and others would like to live. Most national and international declarations on the goals of schooling identify citizenship as a primary concern—including the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (MCEETYA, 1999). This is not about 'politicising' students, but about familiarising them with the practices, rights and responsibilities of democracy—an understanding of civility and active citizenship. Actively building the conditions for a democratic public space is an important task for an ethics of engagement in education.

An ethics of care

I suggest that, particularly in these times, we need to strive to build an ethics of care in our educational institutions, so that alongside the intellectual development of our students, we value and nurture a concern for what it is to be a human being. This means building our schools into places where being human—with all its possibilities and failings—means caring for each other, even those who are not the same as ourselves. And this means acknowledging the other, the stranger, the foreigner, in ourselves as well.

On this theme, the work of Levinas (1998) provides a profound challenge to self and other. Levinas challenges the idea of the rational, autonomous sovereign

subject who acts ethically; instead, he argues that subjectivity is *constituted* by ethical responsibility for the other: I cannot know myself and then the other; I am myself *because* of my relation to the other. Ethics precedes ontology. As Chinnery (2003, p. 8) puts it, 'There is no self without an other that who summons it to responsibility'. This radical other-centredness means that 'my own self-unfolding cannot be the final goal of my life'.

In *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*, Levinas (1998) takes as a phenomenological starting point the notion of *being* in the relationship of one person to another. This initiates what he calls 'the ethical subject' of 'for-the-other', or *entre-nous*. For Levinas, being human means being in relation to others. Being-for-the-other is *the* ethical principle of humanity; it is *the* inter-human ethical principle, the moment before reciprocity or mutual obligation formalise relationships. It is only in relationship to another other, whom Levinas terms 'the third', that issues of justice and reciprocity arise. For Levinas, the shattering of indifference constitutes the ethical event of the care of one for the other. He uses the notion of 'the face' to signify the presence of the other as more than simply the generalised concept of a human being. (He even said that a dog in the concentration camp—where he was—could in some sense have 'a face'.) The uniqueness of being human, for Levinas, lies in responding to the face of the other with an ethic of care.

It is in the context of these ideas that Levinas's famous essay on 'Useless suffering' should be read. In a phenomenological excursus, Levinas says that suffering is useless: it is 'for nothing', and has a 'depth of meaninglessness', where pain remains 'undiluted' and 'isolates itself in consciousness, or absorbs the rest of consciousness' (1998, p. 93). Suffering has no purpose for the sufferer, and cannot be ascribed meaning in relation to God or Nature or History. In fact, justifying or giving meaning to the suffering of another 'is certainly the source of all immorality' (Levinas, 1998, p. 99). It is only in an inter-human perspective that suffering has meaning: my experience of suffering for the suffering of the other. Levinas sees this as 'the very nexus of human subjectivity' (1998, p. 94).

Applying these ideas to Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, to the conditions of life of Indigenous people, to the blatant social inequalities between rich and poor schools and their students, and to the conditions of global injustice, it can only be said that our apparent indifference reflects the antithesis of Levinas's ethic of care. In Levinas's logic, in our refusal to acknowledge the face of the other, to care for the other prior to any notions of reciprocity and mutual obligation, we deny ourselves, and not only the other, the very basis of our humanity.

Building an ethics of care in education means building a capacity to face suffering and deal with difficult emotions without denying or rejecting them, and without rationalising them away. An ethics of care entails, in Levinas's terms, a shattering of our indifference and a willingness to suffer for the suffering of others. It entails working against the paradox of *doxa* (as Bourdieu [2001] puts it), so that intolerable conditions of existence are recognised for what they are. And, in Gramsci's (1971) terms, it entails willingness to continuously sift through the inventories of who we are in relation to others.

Conclusion

In seeking to foreground ethical considerations in education, I am not attempting to justify any actions which cause human suffering and loss of life. In everyday life, as well as times of crisis and times of war, we live with the horror of the violence and suffering that people inflict on each other for whatever reason. What is required, beyond judging or blaming, is a preparedness to face this and deal with it in ethical ways.

The ethics of engagement, which I am proposing here, is premised on two assumptions: the partialities and power relations imbricated in all discourses; and the significance of human agency in building the social world. In terms of the first premise, an ethics of engagement assumes that the discourses through which we know ourselves and the world construct us as we speak them, in traditions that stretch before and after us. Discourses not only construct the objects of which they speak, as Foucault (1972) noted; they also work to normalise and obscure their own construction and the power relations imbricated by them. A preparedness to engage continuously with deconstruction and reconstruction of discourses of power and positionality is an important strategy in an ethics of engagement in education. It entails recognition of the partiality of all knowledge without surrender to relativism, and a preparedness to engage continuously in reworking matrices and strategies of power, institutional practices, subjectivities and knowledge domains.

Second, the ethics of engagement I am proposing here is premised on recognising the importance of human agency in shaping the material and ideational world. As with other social activities, education contributes towards actively building the world we wish to live in, albeit in circumstances not of our own choosing. Contingency and compromise, hopes and ideals, petty circumstance and grand design are part of human life, as are ways of thinking ethically about ourselves and others. The challenge here is to hold a position of continuous questioning and reflection, including the possibilities opened by the radical alterity of others, and practicalities of how we might live together in sustainable and accountable ways. What I have suggested in this article is the ethical importance of an education that engages with the public good—to strive for an ethics of intellectual rigour, to uphold an ethics of civility and to build an ethics of care.

Key words

critical thinking
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