

# The EAP Practitioner: Competencies and Controversies

The Construction of Professional Identity in  
EAP: A Renewed Call for an Engagement  
with Criticality

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# EAP – a discourse of neutrality?

According to Pennycook, EAP has historically been tied to an adherence to ‘discourses of neutrality’ (1997: 257), which Benesch defines as working on the assumptions that:

English is a *neutral* language; language in general is *neutral*; science and technology are *neutral* rather than cultural and social; academic institutions are *neutral* places rather than sites of struggle between competing interests... [where] its goals and activities as presented as *inevitable* and *natural*. [my emphasis] (Benesch, 2001: 45)

# **The Nature of Professionalisation**

## **‘Outside-in’**

‘While the underlying considerations of autonomy and control, and the moral values of integrity and trust may well be intended by those seeking to professionalize, the ideological agendas of state, managerial and even intra-professional hierarchies cannot be denied or ignored’ (Williams, 2008)

## **‘Inside-out’**

‘... combination of shared and personal experience, the sometimes tacit ways of acting, and even the affective dispositions that people within a profession develop and which come to be labeled as professional’  
(Williams, 2008)

# A Definition of Ideology:

‘...a framework of thought, used in society to create order and give meaning to the political and social world in which we live’ Darder *et al.* (2009: 11)

‘Also important here is the notion that ideology be understood as existing at the deep, embedded psychological structures of the personality. Ideology then, more often than not, manifests itself in the inner histories and experiences that give rise to questions of subjectivity as they are constructed by individual needs, desires and passions...’ Darder *et al.* (*ibid.*)

# As a Consequence...

- Ideology is inescapable, it is part of our being.
- And also, if it is inescapable, claims to neutrality become problematic as if one accepts this more pervasive definition of ideology, everything becomes ideological and consequently, as Benesch (2001: 46) states, 'all teaching is ideological'.
- And if all teaching is ideological, then there is a need for a critical awareness which I argue is central to any construct of professionalism.

# Critical EAP

- Gramsci, social control and ‘contradictory consciousness’
- Foucault and ‘regimes of truth’; power ‘is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but that it comes from everywhere’ (Foucault, 1998: 121-122)
- Thus, from this perspective, any claim to ‘neutrality’ is problematic and perhaps, as Bloland (2005: 121) argues, reflects ‘the widespread disapproval of postmodernism and its protagonists’ within an institution that is essentially modern.

# Poststructuralism and Neutrality

**‘... the indeterminacy of language, the primacy of discourse, the decentering and fragmentation of the concept of the self, the significance of the “other”, a recognition of the ... unbreakable power/knowledge nexus, the attenuation of a belief in metanarratives, and the decline of dependence on rationalism’ Bloland (1995: 526, cited in Bloland, 2005)**

# Barnett and *Realising the University* (2000)

Barnett (2000a) claims that he is:

‘... simply trying to capture some of the context in which the contemporary university has to be understood..., the categories of the postmodern and postmodernism... invite value positions... that are dangerous roads down which to go’.

It is not until the conclusion that Barnett makes explicit his position of neutrality claiming that supercomplexity is a metaconcept (*ibid.*: 167) which he argues is a ‘cleaner concept than the others... is more neutral. It says simply: this is how the world is’.



Barnett claims that supercomplexity is characterised by:

**‘... certain features... namely contestability, challengeability, uncertainty and unpredictability [which] are surrounded by others such as change, turmoil, turbulence, risk and even chaos. Together, this set of concepts mark out the conceptual geography of our supercomplex age as an age of fragility... (Barnett, 2000b: 415–416)**

# Teaching Implications of Supercomplexity:

- The ‘new university’ as a ‘learning centre’ needs to be coupled with the idea of being a centre of unlearning (Barnett, 2000a: 127)
- academics should be encouraged to interact with one another across disciplines so as to better understand one another (*ibid.*: 136)
- the university should construct channels for academics to communicate with one another (*ibid.*: 137)
- Further, in a period of ‘a global migration of knowledge production... there are no boundaries to research and no definite forms that it might take.’ Thus, “Research” evaporates.’ (*ibid.*: 149).

# Teaching Implications of Supercomplexity

- ‘There can be no facile presentation of solutions to problems for there are no solutions to problems... There are only stories of understanding problems which are themselves disputable.’ (*ibid.*:151)
- ‘... create epistemological and ontological disturbance in the minds and in the *being* of students: it has to pose cognitively and experientially the radical uncertainty presented by supercomplexity. Students have to come to *feel* in every sense the utter insecurity of the post-modern world.’ [original emphasis] (*ibid.*: 154)

# A Critical Positioning for EAP?

- An engagement with criticality (where criticality is defined in Barnett's terms of an epistemological and ontological disturbance in the minds and being of students)
- An opportunity for cross-curricular collaboration (Benesch, 2001: 41) where
- '[L]inked' courses act as 'effective vehicle[s] for EAP faculty and students to influence and possibly change conditions in academic culture' (Benesch, 2001: 42) where
- Students and lecturers are engaged in a more democratic dialogue and where
- Critical thinking should become part of the student's and lecturer's being so that it becomes a liberatory experience for both.

# Bibliography

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