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Educational expertise in a post-truth society?

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

We live in a post-truth society, displayed in a range of political and social contexts. This, I argue, has a particularly deleterious effect on the work of practice-focused researchers, such as those researching education. Rather than being a new trend, I argue that this is the latest manifestation of a longer-term decline in reasoned debate. Drawing on the work of MacIntyre and Fricker, I conceptualise the problem and identify the solution – the need for hermeneutical and testimonial justice. This is a solution that has resonances with 30 years of work by Richard Pring, himself a strong defender of the value of the practice, informing the imperatives of educational research. Indeed, Pring's earlier work offers practical solutions pertinent to our present situation.

Full paper

Recent political history, e.g. Johnson, Trump, Brexit, and Covid-19 (anti)vaccination, has shed light on our lives in a *post-truth society*, where, Illing (2018) notes, there is a disappearance of 'shared standards of truth'. In such a society, politics shifts from being the discussion of ideas or even 'what works' to a play for the emotions of the majority. A context within which Michael Gove, an early adopter, was able to label a raft of educational luminaries 'the blob' (see The Independent. 2014). In this paper, I argue that *post-truth* is the latest manifestation of a broader ethical discourse, 'emotivism' (see Stevenson, 1944), and consider the implications of MacIntyre's (1985; 2016) critique of emotivism, his articulation of a dystopian present and the resources he provides for an alternative social contract between experts and society (especially MacInyre, 1987, 1999).

In particular, I am concerned with what it will take for educational researchers to build a form of engagement with the wider public based on the value of their expertise. Clearly, there are good professional reasons for academics to ensure that they are engaging with the wider society, however, as Pring (2000) points out, educational researchers have more reasons than others. As he makes clear, what makes educational research *educational* as opposed to general *social scientific* research is its concern with informing educational practice. A post-truth society and political context is particularly deleterious to practice focused scholarship like educational research. Recent work in expertise (Kotzee and Smit, 2017; Gobet, 2017), I argue,

misses the central issue of the contemporary context for any discussion of expertise and hence does not address these educational concerns.

MacIntyre (1985) argues that all societies are structured in relation to particular moral theories. Late modernity is defined largely in terms of emotivism, which rejects reasoned argument in the defence of ethical judgement. Rather, the aim of debate is to persuade one's opponents through the use of rhetorical and emotional devices. For MacIntyre, this is not just the state of play in one area of life but is reflected in all areas: the lecture hall, board room, street, and barracks. Practically, this leads to what MacIntyre calls 'protest', where opponents declare their particular ideas knowing both that they will not be able to change the minds of their opponents and that they are safe in not having their own ideas changed. MacIntyre draws attention to three subtle mechanisms for persuasion which have become endemic in contemporary society: personal choice, unquestioned bureaucratic goals, and consensus. Making decisions based on personal choice, following pre-set goals or consensus is not necessarily wrong in some circumstances. Where these are used rather than appropriate use of reasons and evidence, however, difficulties emerge.

There are a range of choices that need to be made in relation to higher education (HE), from top level concerns with the point of HE per se through educational aims, curricula, pedagogies, and the individual judgements of individual course teams. Educational research in its various forms seeks, usually explicitly, to inform these choices through the development of reasons and evidence as to why some answers are better than others. Clearly, educational research does not speak with one, coherent voice; researchers disagree. There is a need for *judgement* as well as evidence and reasons. However, at a minimum the task for educational researchers is to ensure that educational policies and practices are *research informed*.

However, what Macintyre draws attention to, is that good evidence and good research are neither enough, nor in the present climate, the priority. In this paper, I develop MacIntyre's (1987, 1999) insights through a consideration of recent work in social epistemology. Following Fricker et al. (2020), I focus on the requirements, philosophical, sociological and psychological, for educational experts to be shown 'testimonial justice' by policymakers and practitioners. Such arguments address the social context of the epistemic: what is to count as knowledge, the ways in which knowledge produced, and the way it is understood as knowledge. At the heart of my argument is that policymakers and practitioners are to give testimonial justice, then educational researchers need to display hermeneutical justice to them. By this, I mean they need to shape their social and discursive engagements in order to express ideas in concepts and ways that can be understood by others' not only as knowledge but as useful knowledge for education.

Thus, understanding testimonial and hermeneutical justice through MacIntyre's structural lens, leads back to Pring's (1977) more common-sense account of the relationship between researchers and educators.

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