

On Becoming a Professional Marveller
Pedagogical Practice as Professional Development

Ann Pelo

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Reflection by Liz Battersby, 25 April 2016

After one full, yet all-too-short day in the presence of the remarkable educator and author, Ann Pelo, I marvelled at how fast the time went, as she challenged us to think deeply about the essence of exemplary pedagogical practice. Her scholarly, provocative, and inclusive guidance of our understanding reminded me of the intense experience of listening to and grappling with the innovative and challenging ideas of the Reggio Emilia educators. In both situations, I had much rethinking to do, but was keen to learn more.

Ann's final provocation in a day of provocations was to ask us to reflect on the question:

How do I see the full human self of this child, the full human self of this moment?

This is a poignant question, for as I revisit the key ideas of Ann's presentation today is Anzac Day - a time to remember those who sacrificed so much for their fellow 'human selves', both living and unborn. As our day with Ann unfolded, we explored our own perceptions of the full human self of the child and the full human self of the child and teacher's shared moment and I have thought deeply about that question since. I have come to understand why Ann believes that true pedagogical practice involves teacher and child creating culture together, for we learn best in relationship with each other. She encouraged us to challenge ourselves always to pursue what the next layer might be when developing our pedagogical practice and to consider what the next question could be that we haven't yet asked.

On Anzac Day it is especially moving to reflect on Ann's suggestion that at the heart of education there are two essential questions:

What kind of people do we want to be?

What kind of world do we wish to have?

After considering our responses, Ann then asked us to think about the purpose of education. Not for her the prevalent view that education is for preparing very young children for school and that school is for preparing older children and young people for the workforce. For those of us who reject this view, Ann offers an appealing alternative that is grounded in authentic development, social justice, and ecological life. Ann illustrated her view in the form of a story from her former centre in Seattle. Early one morning she encountered a child peering into a heater vent, surprised to discover pieces of Lego trapped inside. Soon, all had gathered around the vent. Children commented that it was "yucky and stinky in there." Ann responded that she would clean it, which the children ignored as the stinky vent had captured their interest. One child observed, "There must be a skunk in here; that's why it's stinky." When Ann asked how they supposed a skunk got into the vent, the children offered

their hypotheses and she invited them to make notes so they could remember their thinking. The children drew their different theories about how the skunk got into the vent. When one depicted the skunk climbing stairs, another asked, "How would it get through the doors?" The child explained his theory by pulling out a piece of rope from his pocket and indicated that the skunk had a rope and made a lasso to open the doors. A lovely tone of delight and dismay developed. The consensus was to send the skunk away, so the children dictated a note to the skunk telling it to go away, but then asked its name. They put the note next to the vent and during the morning more notes and drawings were placed there for the skunk.

Ann proposed to a new teacher at the centre that they write a response from the skunk to the children. She was clear that the children would respond with wonderment and awe, but her colleague thought it would be a betrayal of their dignity and disrespectful to interfere with their imagination. They discussed their points of view and Ann says they became co-educators at that moment, deciding upon a solution: to create a third space that teachers and children would construct together to honour the full capacity of the children and increase complexity. They agreed to put the notes to the skunk away to allow the existence of multiple truths. The next morning the children engaged more deeply, expressing their theories about the skunk. When one child noticed the notes had gone she responded, "I know there is a real skunk." A second child suggested, "Maybe it's a dead skunk." A third child deduced, "It took away the letter, so must be alive." A fourth child wrote a letter from the skunk:

Dear Garden Room, I'm sorry I chewed up your letter and took your present away. I'll send you a letter soon...

Ann encouraged us to listen to how wholeheartedly the children responded.

When asking us to consider what kind of world we want, she quoted Tom Hunter's profound question:

*How can we prepare our children for a world we cannot yet see?
I say we work hard so they can become as human as they can be.*

Tom Hunter
"As Human as They Can Be"

Ann asserted that is what education could be and asked us to discuss our responses to this. Having just finished reading *NeuroTribes – the legacy of autism and how to think smarter about people who think differently*, (Silberman, 2015), I found her provocation apposite. I reflected on how I could ensure that my pedagogical practice embraces all children, not only the neurotypical, but also the neurodiverse, and I recalled the Reggio Emilia perspective that children have special rights, rather than special needs.

In elaborating on the idea of working hard so that children can be as human as they can be, Ann explained that a vital way to secure this is through projects that matter - which can move us beyond our individual understandings. She referred to the *Wonder of Learning* exhibit as a conversation in which each voice is necessary; a project of creating, rather than consuming, knowledge. She believes that we can be a community that creates together, a community of learners with a shared identity, moving beyond reflecting on practice to reflecting on theory that helps us understand practice.

Ann believes that creating a community that learns and has a shared identity means we must move from a safe space to a brave space, wrestling through our practice, and from theory to practice. She thinks that dialogue is not just a matter of talking to one another, but rather it is a “collaborative act.” (Jones and Nimmo, 1999).

When considering a “brave space”, Ann asked us:

What is it to create that third space?

What might it look like for a centre or school to be a brave space?

- *For children?*
- *For educators?*
- *For families?*

She proposed that such a space requires us to be willing to linger in uncertainty and that a community that learns together is anchored in pedagogical practice. Ann next encouraged us to consider the meaning of the word pedagogy. She herself had engaged in ongoing conversations with a colleague about its meaning, exploring the metaphorical idea of pedagogy as walking with children, with families; a walk that involves talk, rhythm, a journey together, with a destination that is not predetermined; a walk that involves exploring together ideas that matter to us, in a dialogue that carries us together to some surprises, depth, and new ways of knowing. She reminded us of Peter Moss’s (2006) comments on pedagogical documentation as a process for making pedagogy visible. Thus, it is “*subject to interpretation, dialogue, confrontation (argumentation) and understanding.*” Ann then suggested that rather than going on a walk by ourselves, we are trying to seek out the complexities of the moment, so we can be in service of children’s pursuits. Pedagogical practice has a more expansive way of being in the world, as captured in the child’s question about how a skunk could get into the heater vent.

In response to what gets in the way of our being professional marvellers, Ann offered Carol Ann Wien’s suggestion that teacher scripts do. No doubt, we could all relate to this when we reflect on the rules, routines and schedules that affect our practice. As an authentic alternative to teacher scripts, Ann recommends pedagogical documentation, recording and collecting as many different examples of children’s learning to demonstrate that they are learning and growing. She explored the idea of being in a pedagogical relationship, “leaning in” to a moment, rather than following a script. Transforming our practice brings us closer to the robust image of the child so steadfastly held by Malaguzzi and his colleagues.

When discussing pedagogical documentation as a means of transforming us into teacher researchers, Ann drew upon Meier and Henderson’s pertinent definition:

Teacher research is systematic, critical inquiry made public. As an approach, teacher research provides a habit of mind and a set of tools that help teachers to stop reacting, and begin to see that by just looking, and then telling others what they see, they begin to deepen and clarify their role.

Daniel Meier and Barbara Henderson,
Learning from Young Children in the Classroom

Ann pointed out that for the teachers in Reggio Emilia such practice is a daily habit. She asked us to reconfigure our image of what it means to be an educator - a thinker, a researcher, suggesting that the first element is that of a habit of mind. She then asked us to

reflect on what we thought would be a habit of mind for teacher research. To help deepen our response, she read a sentence, asked us to choose one of four endings and to move to a corner of the room according to our chosen ending for a teacher. We chose from the metaphor of a teacher as an acupuncturist, a weaver, a riverboat guide, or a piano tuner. Afterwards each group offered its reasons for its choice. I was initially torn, as I could relate to each idea and was tempted to move to the corner that was rapidly filling with fellow weavers. However, the metaphor of a teacher as an acupuncturist appealed most, as my experience of acupuncture was deeply gratifying. This was all to do with the acupuncturist himself who built my trust, took time to listen closely, and was profoundly empathetic; indeed he was as human as can be.

As we work to become teacher researchers, I would support Ann's recommendation to consider the exacting, but illuminating habits of mind developed at Mission Hill School in Massachusetts:

1. *Evidence: "How do you know?"*
2. *Connections: "How is this connected to something else I already know or care about?"*
3. *Perspective or Viewpoint: "From whose perspective is this being told?" "How else might this look, if we stepped into other shoes? If we were looking at it from a different direction? If we had a different history or expectation?"*
4. *Conjecture: "How can I imagine a different outcome?"*
5. *Relevance: "Why is this important?"*

Matthew Knoester,
Democratic Education in Practice: Inside the Mission Hill School

To add to the usefulness of these habits of mind, it would be extremely valuable to investigate the concept of The Thinking Lens®. Ann developed this resource with KU Children's Services in Australia as a research tool to help teacher-researchers notice, recognise and respond to children's play and conversations in ways that empower children to be as human as they can be.

The sequence of The Thinking Lens® suggests:

- *Know yourself: open your heart to this moment.*
- *Take the children's point of view.*
- *Examine the environment.*
- *Collaborate with others to expand perspective.*
- *Reflect and take action.*

Ann went on to explain that Visible Thinking, another complementary approach, could become a helpful protocol; one that grows from a community that learns. Visible Thinking poses a series of questions with the potential to extend our capacity as teacher researchers:

See, Think, Wonder

- *What do you SEE?*
- *What do you THINK about that?*
- *What does it make you WONDER?*

Connect, Extend, Challenge

- *How are the ideas CONNECTED to what you already know?*
- *What new ideas do you have that EXTEND your thinking in new directions?*

- *What is still CHALLENGING or hard for you to get your mind around? What questions, wonderings or puzzles do you now have?*

Think, Puzzle, Explore

- *What do you think you know about this?*
- *What questions or PUZZLES do you have?*
- *What does this make you want to explore?*

Project Zero: Visible Thinking,
<http://www.visiblethinkingpz.org/>

For our next provocation, Ann showed images of children engaged in learning experiences and asked for our response, using the Visible Thinking protocol. This process challenged me to think carefully and to avoid teacher scripts and making assumptions; it provided me with an excellent framework for analysis. One of the pleasures of Ann's presentation was her skill in facilitating enlightening pedagogical conversations among the audience, and this proved invaluable to me at this point. I had an excellent conversation with a friend and colleague and am sure that for my pedagogical practice to become more systematic and disciplined, the Visible Thinking protocol would be of most benefit in reciprocal dialogue with colleagues.

Ann then explained her view that when "telling the story" in pedagogical documentation we are not looking backwards, but forwards, spinning the story into the future, making learning visible, and making our thinking about the children's thinking visible. The documentation we create is a way of capturing the moment and moving it forward, making our inquiry public, and opening it up to debate and challenge.

While we watched a four-minute video clip of three children investigating together in a sandpit, Ann offered us writing prompts to enable us to practise the idea of falling into a moment as our full human selves. When asked to reflect afterwards, I recalled thinking how much in tune two of the children who were digging together appeared to be - engaged individually, yet together. There was a comfortable rhythm between them and it seemed that they had ample time. I wondered about offering today's "hurried" children the gift of time and how it could enhance their thinking, a sense of peace, and the ability to connect with one another. I thought about not rushing children and when Ann asked us to reflect on something in our teaching that we might regret, for me it would be a school day that is punctuated by a timetable with its pressure to move engaged children on to something different.

As we strive to transform our practice, Ann encouraged us to become more self-aware, listening carefully, asking what is happening inside us, and "bursting open" what it is to be a teacher. She described such practice as creating "a little stop sign", as we pause to "take off the educator hat". Next she asked us to consider two vital questions:

Who are these children and what has their attention?

Who is the educator and what has her attention?

Through our own ongoing reflection on and synthesis of these questions, and indeed all of the ideas Ann explored with us, we could create communities that learn; commit to exchange and conundrums; and determine to grow lively, brave spaces for our pedagogy, always seeking that third space.

Ann guided us skilfully through her worldview with a child's sense of wonder and the wisdom of an exceptional pedagogista. She is herself a professional marveller and while she did disrupt my own "teacher script" with her provocations to be an innovative thinker and a professional marveller, too, I am indebted to her for doing so. By coming to understand more about her empathetic and joyful view of children and the world we share with them, I hope to work as hard as can be to enable children to be as human as they can be.