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## Avenging Betty: Reflections of a Deakin (post)graduate

I graduated from Deakin in 1995, and left for good in 1996. That was all, but I still remember it clearly and warmly, as a major formative experience for me, academically and otherwise. I spent four years there, in Geelong, as a postgraduate student, and I took from it far more than my research qualification. I arrived having completed recent undergraduate study by distance education, and with experience of working in two other universities as a casual tutor. I knew many of the staff through their writing, and was in awe of them – an acolyte come to drink at the fountain of knowledge, and make myself over into an academic. That is, I wasn't (yet) an academic, I was a teacher. I was a practitioner, not a 'theorist' – as I saw it, an intuitive thinker rather than a scholar – and moreover already thirty-eight, and an adult with three small children. My teacherly credentials meant that I was anxious about my chances of making the grade in this new phase of my life.

Looking back now, I see that the pathway bringing me to those white wooden buildings in the paddock on a Geelong hillside in 1991, had been found twenty-five years earlier, in a way that probably could not have taken me anywhere else. I was the Good Subject of socially critical theory, a working-class girl with a social conscience, liberated by my radical feminist sisters early in the 70s, with hairy legs and henna. As I see it now, I had long been conscientised, and that made me very amenable to being at Deakin, as an acknowledged and exemplary site of social justice in education.

Let me tell a brief story: I have never told it before, and yet I think I tell it over and over in different ways in all my work. It's a story about responsibility and the loss of innocence and the gap between the promise of education and the betrayal of that promise in practice.

One Monday in early December, the monitor brought in the morning notices from the office as usual. They held trouble. It appeared that in the previous week two

girls had reported that their sandwiches had gone missing from their school bags. On Thursday, the Head Mistress had thought that the girl might have made a mistake and left her lunch at home, but on Friday, not only was it ascertained that the lunch had been in the bag, but another girl's lunch was taken. Miss Dickson therefore decreed that, from now on, all teachers were to forbid girls from going to the toilet in class time until the lunch thief was apprehended.

I was unconcerned. This had nothing to do with us. Our sandwiches were safe, because as Grade 7s we got out of class earlier than the other girls at lunchtime, to set up the sports equipment. However, on Tuesday morning I was called to the Head Mistress's office. Miss Dickson smiled and asked me if I would help her with a problem. She told me that sandwiches had again disappeared on Monday. She reminded me that no girl in the school had been allowed to enter the toilet area without the supervision of a teacher. So that meant ....? I was slow - I didn't know what that meant. Miss Dickson did not tell me. Instead, she continued: "So I need someone to watch the vestibule when the Grade 7s go down before lunch." She told me I was not to return to class, I was to go straight down to the girls' toilets and wait there till the pre-lunch bell rang. Then, when the other Grade 7 girls came down to collect the sports equipment, I was to watch carefully to see if anyone took anything from any bag on the middle level of the back wall, and report to her immediately.

I thought hard. This was exciting. But it felt funny, too. Miss Dickson had called on me for help, like a Mallory Towers heroine - to catch a thief. And yet... . But she sent me off ("Hop, step!") and I made my way down to the vestibule and looked carefully around at the rows of hooks mounted at three levels, around the walls. There were hundreds of school bags, each one of them with white bread sandwiches fit to tempt a thief. But as I sat on the toilet step, waiting alone in the silence, it suddenly struck me that *one* of these bags mustn't have any sandwiches in it and that its owner, whoever she was, must be very hungry to need to steal someone else's sandwiches, and - I thought harder - she must not have any friends who would share their lunch with her to save her having to steal. Miss Dickson had suggested that that girl was in Grade 7... .

And I knew then, with a sick certainty in my stomach, who that girl was.

I stayed in the toilets when the bell rang. I could not go out into the vestibule to watch Betty Swan pick up a box of beanbags and walk back with the others towards the bag hooks to get her lunch. It would be so easy in the rush to open another bag and remove the lunch - nobody would notice. But I had been sent to watch, to spy, to find out. And I could not bear to know for sure. I stayed in the toilets till the rest of the school came down. I heard the rumble and clatter as girls grabbed lunch and headed outside to eat. I heard the duty teacher suddenly ask

everyone to stop, stand still, and show her their lunches, and I heard the tears of the girl whose lunch had gone. I waited, alone in the toilets, till halfway through lunchtime, mortified that I had failed Miss Dickson, and knowing also that I would be unable to tell her why. I slowly mounted the stairs to the Office. But Miss Dickson's door was closed. She was in the staff room, with all the other teachers. I took a deep breath and knocked, hoping no one would hear. But the door swung open and I was called in to the room - the teachers at their tables all silent, cups of tea in hands, faces turned towards me expectantly, watching, waiting.

Miss Dickson was angry. "Where were you, you silly girl? I asked you to watch. Why didn't you report back to me straight away? Why didn't you see? It has happened again. We have a thief. You should have caught her! You were sent to catch a thief! What have you got to say for yourself?" I burst into tears, in front of all the teachers. I could not say a word, ashamed, full of confusion. They muttered amongst themselves, my teacher Mrs Spence avoiding my eyes. I sobbed. I had nothing to say for myself. Miss Dickson sighed impatiently. "Go and wash your face and go out to play, then - at least we know it wasn't you!" But as I walked back downstairs, heavy with the knowledge that I had let down my teachers, I could only think: "*How* do you know? How can you know?" I could not articulate it then, but I *did* know how they knew - they knew the same way that I had known, and I was glad that I had kept this knowledge secret. *Of course* it was Betty Swan: the poor girl, the skinny red-haired child whose mother had run off last winter and who didn't have shoes, whose school uniform was too small, and who sniffed all the time because she didn't have a handkerchief. It was said her father was an "Irish drunk", and that no one sat next to her because she smelled. We knew she couldn't read, and that she would be going to work at the bakery next year, and not on to high school.

Mrs Spence did not look at me all afternoon. Staring at the clock on the back wall, she informed us, straight after lunch, that there would be no sports equipment at lunchtime until the lunch thief was caught, and that all lunches were to be brought to the classroom, from tomorrow, and laid out on the floor in front of the blackboard. I did not look at Betty Swan. There was whispering among the girls. Mrs Spence grew angry and set us to finish our parsing from yesterday and then complete a dictionary task. The front row girls were called to her desk, one by one, to have their work marked, Betty Swan last of all.

She stood and moved beside the teacher's desk, rubbing her thin arms and looking at the floor as Mrs Spence perused her work. Suddenly the quiet in the room was broken by a shout: "What have you been doing? This is rubbish, Betty Swan, rubbish!" Mrs Spence picked up Betty's work and tore the page from the book, flapping it in front of her face. "Absolute rubbish - fit only for the bin." And with this she rose from her chair, pulling Betty towards her and pushed the girl into the

rubbish bin that stood beside her desk. “Just like you, Betty Swan, rubbish!” There was a gasp, and then a muffled titter around the room, but suddenly silence. Betty did not speak or cry. She cowered in the bin, almost under the desk, her arms covering her head. I looked quickly away, back at my work, my face growing hotter and hotter, while my stomach froze over with shame and fear. Mrs Spence paced across the room and back, glaring down at the girl in the bin. She roughly pulled Betty from the bin and pushed her out of the door, the crumpled page fluttering behind them.

As I recall it now, nobody spoke a word. Every girl’s head was down, all of us intent on our work, united in our silence. Good girls doing nothing in the face of injustice and cruelty. Mrs Spence returned to the classroom, alone. The rule about the sports equipment was revoked the following morning, and there were no more lunch thefts. Nothing was said. Betty Swan was not mentioned again – she was often away, anyway. But in my twelve-year-old heart I knew that this was my fault. If I had been the good girl my teacher thought I was, and caught the lunch thief, she would have been spared this humiliation. I would have saved Mrs Spence from her own degrading violence. What could I do to make this up to Betty Swan? I still do not know the answer, but this question, of how teachers might create classrooms where children like Betty can thrive rather than wither, has guided my work ever since.

Nearly ten years later, in 1975, I began my first year as a secondary English teacher – avenging Betty with enthusiasm. In the large Senior High School where I worked, only some of my students could read or would write, and almost none really engaged with their learning. I began ‘experimenting’ with new ideas in English curriculum, keen to make a difference. In retrospect, over all, I think we did, as teachers working in so-called disadvantaged schools. As Richard Teese (2006) has noted, students in disadvantaged schools are fair game for educational experimentation, and not all of it is bad. I subsequently became an advisory teacher and a departmental consultant. In this role, and as a member of the WA English Teachers Association in the late 1970s, I was able to attend conferences and seminars aimed at reforming English teaching in line with what was becoming known as the ‘New English’. Importantly, I became involved with the national Language and Learning project, led by Garth Boomer. Along with ideas about what was taught in English classrooms, this large educational reform movement drew strongly on ideas about action research being generated at Deakin, which

would subsequently take shape in the series of Deakin University monographs that have remained influential across educational practitioners ever since (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). My action research on ‘negotiating education’ in an English classroom gave me the opportunity to see what would happen, as a genuine *research* question, if I took further my youthful pledge to avenge Betty Swan by attempting, systematically and strategically, to improve the experience of disadvantaged kids in classrooms. What would happen if, as a teacher, I could suspend my pre-formed knowledge and judgement about students and their capabilities, and work *with* them in constructing curriculum and pedagogy.

That project was intensely demanding, satisfying and rewarding for us all, and remains one of the best memories I have of an extended teaching experience. The insistence that this was *research*, and that my actions as a teacher needed to be rigorously recorded, reported, analysed and theorised meant a new realisation: although the textual work of writing was seemingly harder than the dynamic, embodied, work of practice, I found pleasure in the challenge of accounting for and representing practice through a formal research process. This report was first published in Boomer’s 1982 volume *Negotiating the curriculum: A teacher-student partnership*, and also in his later revised version (Boomer et al., 1991). To my great delight, it was also included, prior to that publication, in the original *Action Research Planner* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982) as part of the ECT 432/732 *Action research and the critical analysis of pedagogy* subject offered at Deakin.

To cut a longish story short, I subsequently moved into part-time teaching at Murdoch University, as a teacher educator. I was clearly under-qualified at this point, at least academically. Although very glad to have the new job, I felt the heavy responsibility of such a move, into a situation where I could potentially influence what primary teachers learned about how to teach children like Betty Swan from their earliest years of school. I had started part-time study at the University of Western Australia, but soon decided I needed more than was on offer there, and decided to transfer my study program to Deakin, where I completed a Bachelor of Education, by Distance. The subjects on reading, writing and children’s literature that I took with Frances Christie, Rod Maclean and Rhonda Bunbury allowed me to revisit, from a theoretical perspective, the work I had been doing as a teacher,

consultant and curriculum writer. They enabled me to examine my practice as a teacher educator, and reshape and re-present my existing knowledge in different forms and modes. They gave me confidence, and again, because the ideational content was familiar, relevant to, and connected to my everyday practice, allowed me the pleasures of experimenting with and extending my knowledge.

Programming and planning were key aspects of the primary English curriculum subject I taught with Bill Green in this period, at Murdoch, and he suggested that my interest in this area could form the basis of a research higher degree program. In 1988 I enrolled in Deakin's Master of Education course, still by Distance, and there began a series of coursework subjects with Ken Clements and Colin Henry that extended my knowledge of educational inquiry and action research in particular. This work was exhilarating, and I decided to continue the study at doctoral level, and to move to Deakin, where I could learn from the leading action researchers. I arrived in Geelong in 1991, with three young children in tow, and a scholarship application already completed. With neither honours degree nor formal research training, that application was not successful, and I waited several months until managing to obtain a Deakin postgraduate study award the following year, in the second round of offers.

When I graduated in 1995 with a PhD awarded for a dissertation (*Synthetic Practice: Teachers Programming for Primary English*) arguing the central role of programming as intellectual practice in the everyday work of teachers, I had achieved far more than the qualification and a stamp of legitimacy. And it is to what I gained from my study at Deakin that I want to turn now. While this account has without question been somewhat indulgent on my part, it highlights, I believe, the importance of Deakin for teachers and teaching more generally – for, of course I was not the only one who came to Deakin 'from a classroom'. I had arrived, as it turns out, at the end of the first wave of intellectual power at Deakin – when it seemed that things were, ever so slightly, and just around the edges, beginning to fray. I was a newcomer, connected personally and professionally through my history of work in language and learning to several members of staff, and working now under the supervision of one of these, Marie Brennan. Very soon, I joined a group of other doctoral students at Geelong who had all come to participate in, and learn from, the academics around us.

I was lucky in that company, as I found that my arrival, in 1991, coincided with the graduation of the first cohort of internal Honours students from a course run by Stephen Kemmis, several of whom (Lyn Harrison, Robyn Zevenbergen, Jennifer Hurley and Peter Kelly) had moved directly to begin full-time doctoral studies in 1992. We had different supervisors, and were working on different projects, but we were all, as novices, sharing the same problems, asking the same questions, and over that year, as several members of this cohort took up employment, changed to part-time study, or dealt with other interruptions to their study, I came to find particular friendship and mutuality in the company of a small group of women. Like me, they were either studying full-time, like Lyn, Robyn and Jenny Hurley, or were staff members studying part-time, like Helen Modra and Jennifer Angwin. There were lots of other staff members still completing their doctoral studies, and other full-time doctoral students, too, of course, but this particular group hung together – all feeling our way into understanding what it meant to study full-time, as (mostly) mature-aged students, and we were all paralysed, at the start, by the enormity of the task we had taken on, and also the sense of a sometimes explosive tension in the air around us.

Nobody ever said anything to us explicitly, people were far too professional for that, but from where we stood, it seemed that relationships between some of the staff, even some of our supervisors, were difficult, even acrimonious – not because people disliked each other, but because they thought *differently*. There wasn't a Deakin 'line' we could all follow. Action research was no longer the only thing for which Deakin researchers were widely known and respected. The feminist critique of critical theory, particularly as it developed for us within the regular meetings and seminars offered by the Women's Educational Research Group (WERG), led by Jane Kenway and Jill Blackmore, was unsettling to some of the certainties and premises on which several of us were basing our study. We read (and in some instances, heard and met) people like Patti Lather, Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, Elizabeth Ellsworth, Bronwyn Davies. We read and talked with each other and our supervisors, all of us seduced by the 'fit' of these new theoretical perspectives with our own histories and experience as women positioned as simultaneously more and less powerful subjects within the range of competing discourses that constituted each of us in our daily lives.



I felt keenly the inadequacies of my thesis work on teachers programming primary English, for instance, which was deliberately framed as a form of critical-emancipatory action research. How could it ever be seen as liberatory? Clearly, any ‘empowerment’ we achieved as research participants was ever only partial, provisional, unsettled. But I believed in action research, and the power of collaborative action. As we listened, read and learned, our language became a site of tension – our words often betraying an inadequate grasp of theory, as patriarchal discourses continued to speak us and betray our inadequacies in wider company. And so we stayed quiet in seminars, silenced by fear of seeming foolish, hardly ever asking a question in public, or daring to expose our beginner knowledge, afraid of appearing stupid, under-read, and attracting to ourselves the scorn or impatience we witnessed directed by our supervisors at each other. I sometimes felt that we were observing a sort of theory war, watching and listening as our respective supervisors argued from their own positions of articulation along a theoretical continuum – feminist scholars and poststructuralists at one end, critical theorists and action researchers at the other. Still learning to speak these Deakin languages fluently we were nonetheless excited, caught up in the ideas, but often only able to talk, really talk, with each other. The importance of intellectual community for doctoral students is now well recognised, and in this I feel that what we produced for ourselves at Deakin, outside of the formal seminar sessions and supervisory meetings, was a strong and supportive mechanism to cope with the interpersonal struggles we sensed around us, and sometimes experienced.

On reflection, I see that these tensions that we were noticing this time had partly arisen as a result of the institutional amalgamation that Deakin was then undergoing – the restructuring of teaching and research groups as uncomfortably-new cross-campus groupings; the need to adjust to the departure of some old colleagues and to make room for new people – a sense of change, and loss and grieving for the end of the Dream of Deakin, and the regret that this glittering spire in a muddy Geelong paddock was changing forever. Given the intellectual investments and passions, the struggles, the youths that had been spent in the creation of the Deakin of popular myth, disillusionment at its transformation into what threatened to be just another university was perhaps not at all surprising.

I was involved in other things. Buttressed both by the safety of the women's doctoral group, where my thesis was slowly being re-articulated and tentatively developed, and regular corridor chats with people like Rob Walker about the innovative methodologies he was working on in his multimedia Hathaway study (Walker et al., 1996) I was able to work with Barbara Kamler and Rod Maclean to plan a challenging study of gendered literacy in an early childhood classroom. Funded by the national Gender Equity and Curriculum Reform program, we spent five weeks in January and February 1993 in a local Geelong school kindergarten classroom (Prep), recording the first month of school for a whole class of five-year-olds. Over the remainder of that year we developed the feminist post-structuralist analysis of the video, audio and text data we had collected that was published as *Shaping up Nicely* (Kamler et al., 1993). Although taking on a new research project in the middle of a full-time doctoral candidature may well have been seen as a risky venture, the theoretical connections between the two projects was similar, and I found that I could write, here, in a way that prepared me for the hard and careful revision of my dissertation text. Our account of the construction of gendered school subjectivity in this early childhood classroom, while effectively taking months away from the fast-disappearing length of my doctoral scholarship, actually enabled that work. In particular, the later analysis of our methodological practice (Reid et al., 1996), written in parallel with the final draft of my dissertation, ultimately made the finalisation of that text easier, because I now had practical experience in the use of poststructuralist theory to apply to the re-analysis and re-thinking of my programming action research.

More importantly, though, this time spent back in a classroom, highlighted even more strongly the ways in children with similar histories to that of 'Betty Swan', are constituted as failures in a school system framed within middle-class culture and practice. We were able to document the manner in which dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity, literate practice and classroom success work to position children and teachers in particular ways in accordance with normative views of genre, ethnicity, and school success. This study shaped my subsequent research choices just as significantly as my work in the programming of curriculum and pedagogy. It led directly to my involvement in the *100 Children go to School* projects from 1996 to 2002

(Hill et al., 1998, 2002). Once my thesis was finalised and submitted in 1994, I immediately took up casual work at IKE, Deakin's Institute of Koorie Education, under Wendy Brabham, teaching language and literacy subjects to Indigenous student teachers from all around Australia, who had come to Deakin for the community-based program developed from the historic Deakin-Bachelor (D-BATE) program set up by John Henry in the early 1980s. I am still working in Indigenous teacher education today, both as a researcher (Reid et al., 2009) and as a curriculum developer and manager. Although my last year at Deakin was on a part-time lecturing and tutoring basis, the decision to do my graduate work there was worth it. I took up a full-time Level B job the following year in English teacher education, at Ballarat, and I have worked in this field ever since. I still remember Betty, and I have continued to work on matters of social and educational disadvantage. Looking back, Deakin was exactly the right place for me, then. However complicated, it was a very good beginning.

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