

Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain

Gregynog Conference 2018

Monday 23rd July – Wednesday 25th July
(Monday 6 p.m. to Wednesday 11.30 a.m.)

ABSTRACTS

Gordon Bearn

Subversive Singularity: Beyond Meaning and Knowledge

“Singularity is subversive.”
Edmund Jabès

Algebraic thinking is fast because it waxes our ears to the sensual singularities of texts and textures. When we approach a subject ready to use generic abstractions, we can miss almost everything. All we notice is that it is a Gothic novel, or that it was influenced by Frankenthaler, or that our stock price is rising. In such a frame, even the humanities become empirical disciplines, determining whether this or that generic concept applies to the targets of our investigation. Now even humanistic research is speeding up.

For universities, the problem of speed is deeper than the problem posed by the neoliberal ecology in which they are said to survive. It is an existential curse, for when a useful algebra descends to drudgery and routine, our spirit breaks as surely as our publications increase. Is there any way to slow down?

Perhaps the answer is already in our hands, and in our eyes, the sensual singular, beyond meaning and beyond knowledge. Perhaps we should turn away both from empirical and transcendental meanings, after all, meaning was always dominated by some algebraic syntax or other. What if beyond meaning and knowledge, we turned to the sound, the paint, the blank page, the ink itself. The singular is subversive.

Aislinn O'Donnell

Material Thinking: Creative Pedagogies, Pluralism, and Public Education

This paper seeks to understand what 'making public' means in educational spaces, and the relationship between the public with which education is concerned, and the public of democracy. Instead of seeing education as being in the service of democracy, concerned with instilling 'democratic values', or arguing for democratic education, I reflect on the ways in which education can afford the preconditions for democratic life when it concerns itself with fostering pluralistic sensibilities. Here I investigate qualities and rhythms of experiences and encounters that educational spaces make possible, in particular in respect of the role of the aesthetic, the imagination, and sensibility in education.

Educational spaces are curious spaces, even if the story of education is in part the story of the 'domestication' of humankind. They can invite the temporary suspension of practical interest in order to create and renew different kinds of relations to the world and the everyday, beyond those of function and utility. When they resist tendencies toward uniformity, homogeneity or the kinds of dogmatism that can stem from neo-colonial certainties, they can create a different kind of commons, inviting poetic contiguities that are resonant with the pluralism of the public sphere. Creative pedagogies that work with the idea of material thinking can come to create a sense and experience of what William James once called 'a pluralistic universe'. Building on the concept of pluralism that emerges from these reflections, I will discuss some of the ways in which the concept of the public operates differently in the space of politics from the space of education.

Rille Raaper

Constructing student politics in the age of consumerism: the perspectives of sabbatical officers in England

Guided by a Foucauldian theorisation, this paper explores the ways in which a selection of sabbatical officers from English students' unions constructs their political subjectivity within the context of the recent Higher Education and Research Act 2017. While scholarly discussions have critiqued the structural reforms introduced in the Act (e.g. the Teaching Excellence Framework and the Office for Students), there has been less analysis of the policy in terms of its underpinning consumerist discourse. I will therefore start by situating the reform in a more established consumerist understanding of universities and students, regulated by consumer law. I will then draw on my recent British Academy project that traced the ways in which five students' unions from England and their sabbatical officers made sense of the Act and their role in challenging and/or enforcing consumer rights. My discussion will be supported by Brooks (2017), Klemenčič (2014) and Luescher-Mamasela (2013), who suggest that motives for student politics have shifted over the recent years to align with a marketised sector. Many unions have been professionalised to better represent consumer interest. It will be further supported by a Foucauldian theorisation of subjectivity.

From a Foucauldian perspective, possibilities for becoming a political subject are in a constant process of being produced. There are no universal necessities in human nature, only various technologies through which the individual is constructed and their experiences negotiated. While the sabbatical officers interviewed demonstrated significant opposition to the Act and further marketisation of higher education, their agency was limited and often accompanied by consumerist counter arguments. The officers emphasised existing and proposed consumer rights as benefitting students and their unions which hindered their opportunities to challenge the reform. This shift towards a fragmented political subjectivity in the sabbatical officers' experience will be discussed in relation to three increasingly powerful stakeholders in English universities: a) university management; b) professional staff in students' unions; c) student population they represent.

Julian Stern

Why care about schools?

This paper makes use of the philosophies of John Macmurray and Nel Noddings to explore issues of care with respect to schooling. From the basis of care ethics expressed in terms of mutuality, as fundamental to schooling, the argument is extended to care ethics as 'first philosophy'. That is, the significance of care in epistemology (caring for the object of study, in Macmurray's definition of reason) and ontology (persons as inherently mutual carers) is also central to schooling. Schools, with all their micro-political inequalities, are therefore also, intentionally, mutual and egalitarian institutions. Learning in schools, although often described in terms of school 'subjects' that are impersonal, is itself a form of mutual care in which subjects are studied for the sake of making 'better people' (in Noddings' phrase). Care as a first principle of schooling is challenged by external performativity and functional drivers, but we should care about schools precisely because caring can and must be central to all the school's activities.

Alison MacKenzie

'Just Google it': digital literacy and the epistemology of ignorance

In this paper I will examine digital literacy within the context of the philosophical study of ignorance. Ignorance of how digital technologies work, how users' online activities can be used to the advantage of the platform owners without the users' knowledge, and, indeed, how the internet appears to be structured so as to encourage people who enter it to confine their browsing to opinions they already accept, does not seem to be well understood. The ways in which we search for, use and communicate information through the web, and the roles and effects of search engines, has been, and remains, largely unknown to most users. We seem largely ignorant of the effects and uses of our cognitive outsourcing and online monitoring, on our status as competent informants - or that we have online avatars. Further, as the internet is designed it will be influenced by motivations, values, and intentions that are embedded in its architecture, but because that design is often diffuse, it is difficult to know whom to query when these features become troublesome.

Asymmetries of power in the context of the digital environment, influence attributions of epistemic authority: whom we afford credibility excess or deficit. Such attributions can impact on general models of knowledge; the epistemic standing of knowers or producers of knowledge (their reputation or ranking); whose claims various epistemic communities, such as students, will accept, and ought to accept as credible; and how this affects the distribution of knowledge and ignorance in society (using stigmatising stereotypes or fair, unbiased results in a search engine).

Students may not be the autonomous learners and pursuers of knowledge they believe themselves to be, and they may be lacking in important literacies with respect to online learning and browsing: how knowledge is produced, valued, and bequeathed. If students are restricted in what they can know because they are unaware of exogenous actors (e.g. algorithms), and how they guide their choices and shape their experiences online, then a key issue with which we need to contend is how to educate students to be critically aware of how power operates in online spaces, and how ways of thinking and being are culturally produced and re-produced. The challenge is to understand how digital literacy practices pave the way for the construction of ignorance, and to develop approaches to counter it.

Desirée Weber

The Promise and Peril of Education in Political Thinking

The role of education in shaping the participants of political life and our understanding of political reality is a perennial topic in political theory. In this paper, I analyze the contributions of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Dewey to this conversation. Both theorists emphasize the role of teaching and learning in their respective discussions because the educational process – analogous on this point to the realm of politics – is concerned with the transmission of norms and habits that shape us and our society. But we engage in these processes with few guarantees about the outcome of our efforts. Will they result in the brightest promises being fulfilled or does a perilous future await us? By focusing on experience, habits, and practices achieved through education, Wittgenstein and Dewey provide a way forward.

Conference Fee

£180 (£60 full-time students or unwaged)
(includes accommodation and meals)

Venue

[Gregynog Hall](#), Tregynon, nr Newtown,
Powys, Wales, SY16 3PW

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Online booking [here](#)

Any questions?

Contact the Conference Organisers [Naomi Hodgson](#) or [Amanda Fulford](#), or contact pesgb@sasevents.co.uk

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