Brian Street - Thinking Through Practice and Working with Theory

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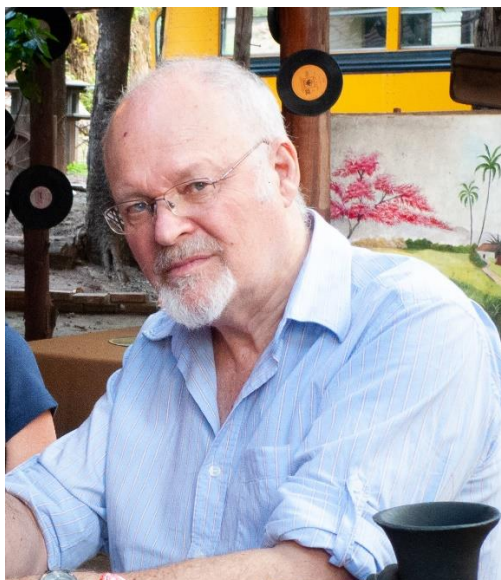
Figure 1: Professor Brian Street, 1943-2017. (Photograph by C. Leung)

Introduction

Brian Street joined King's College London as Professor of Language Education in 1996. For the best part of twenty years Brian was an enthusiastic and tireless colleague and teacher in the School of Education, Communication and Society. Already a well-established scholar, he continued to develop and extend his ideas in language and literacy theory and practice throughout his time at King's. He drew on his intellectual grounding in cultural anthropology and literary studies in highly productive and imaginative ways when working with theoretical and educational matters (see Castenheira and Bloome, 2021 for an informed account of his intellectual trajectories). His own professional conduct was infused with a strong commitment to social justice and widening participation in public education. As colleagues and students we have had the privilege and benefits of working with Brian. In this symposium article, we put together three accounts that provide glimpses of Brian's ways of living and working as an intellectual activist.

Academic Language and Literacy Development (ALLD) Programme

Constant Leung and Tracey Costley

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was a good deal of public policy attention to the limited access to higher education for young people from marginalised sectors of British society. As language education professionals we were aware that academic use of English was a hurdle for many multilingual learner-users of English as an Additional Language. Brian, together with a team of colleagues and doctoral students in the (then) School of Education at King's, secured the necessary funding to cover the running costs of a non-fee paying Saturday morning academic literacy programme for up to 20 linguistic minority 'A' level students from local schools in London. The programme offered a three-hour session every Saturday during term times from January to December between 2003 and 2007 on campus. Student recruitment was based on local school teacher recommendations. When college funding ended, the programme continued to be run in local schools in adapted forms for several more years (for further details see OFSTED, 2005; Scalone and Street, 2006.). Here we offer a

brief account of how Brian brought his research-based critical approach to literacy into his teaching to open up classroom spaces for student voices.

The participant students seemed to find the university environment both unfamiliar and enchanting. The novelty of the Saturday classes was captured by this conversation from a group of students and Tracey Costley (TC), one of the teaching team:

> Student A: Miss, miss…the guy with the hat and beard … is he like a Professor?
> TC: Yes, he is
> Student B: Is he famous?
> TC: Yes, he is
> Student B: Wow…and he comes here on a Saturday morning to teach students like us?
> TC: Yes
> Students: That's cool Miss …

The professor was of course Brian, complete with his beret. These classes were an initiative designed to offer local secondary school students an opportunity to come to learn about some of the different language and literacy practices associated with studying at university. In the sessions we worked with students from a range of 'non-traditional' backgrounds who were interested in going to university. The main aim was to provide an opportunity for these students to explore the different ways in which disciplinary content and institutional information – from research texts and essays to personal statements and course descriptions – are expressed in and represented by a variety of genres and text types.

The founding principle of the ALLD programme was that all students, regardless of their social and language backgrounds, should be encouraged and supported in their efforts to go to university. The curriculum content was designed to provide the participant students an opportunity to become aware of the contexts and activities in which they use English to both interact with others in class and with texts, in order to understand and engage with the kinds of language and literacy practices at university. Brian taught these Saturday sessions regularly. He would encourage the students to see that there were different kinds of activities in academic work such as listening to lectures and seminar discussion, each of which was associated with different genres of language use. Furthermore, the students were invited to bring their own interests and perspectives into the ways in which they engaged with academic learning, especially in reading and writing. This approach asked the students to think about how academic texts positioned them as listeners and readers, and in turn how they might respond agentively. In these sessions Brian would encourage students to dissect academic materials, and to voice their ideas and opinions in response. He actively helped students to see that academic literacy was not a straitjacket that required uncritical conformity and imitation, and that there was space for students' own agency in using language for academic purposes.

As was central to much of his work, enabling the students to engage with texts in this way was built upon Brian's support for the ethnographic endeavour of making the familiar strange (Leung and Street, 2014, 2017). In his own work and in the support of his students, he invited us all to take a reflexive moment to step back, to listen and pay attention to the voices, perspectives, and practices that may have been overlooked. In the ALLD classes it was always great to see the students engage with texts in these ways and to come a more analytic and personally meaningful understanding. Taking a step back to explore and recognise pluralities was one of Brian's great gifts which not only made him such an engaged and interested scholar, but also an activist and advocate for giving voice to those who might otherwise be excluded.

Perhaps we should mention that a part of the expenditure on the ALLD programme covered the cost of drinks and snacks as well as the bus fares for all of the student participants. Because of his understanding of the power of habitus and the importance of space, Brian felt it was essential for students to be on campus. Coming to the campus, working with members of the academic staff and other students was an important part of the social practice of 'doing university'. It enabled the students to actively experience and shape these spaces. For Brian, ensuring that the students were able to be on campus was an essential part of making these classes meaningful and reflected his genuine commitment to, and interest in, 'the context' and 'the social'. It was also an important reminder that universities are public spaces that are enriched by the varied voices and practices that constitute them.

Empowering the Practitioner

Lynne Isham

I first met Brian in the autumn of 2010 when he was visiting the school where I worked to collect classroom data for his research into students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) studying at Advanced level (A level – the equivalent of matriculation in England). At that time, as a French teacher and also a relatively new senior leader with responsibility for teaching and learning, I was involved in working with a group of colleagues to develop a Critical Thinking approach to our A level subject teaching. The idea that I had the material worthy of doctoral research, or that I might be capable of such an enterprise had not crossed my mind, until Brian, as part of his data collection, visited the class of one of the teachers I was working with. The ensuing discussion with the teacher about some of the approaches he had used in the lesson led Brian to meet with me to find out more about what we were doing with Critical Thinking. As a result of that encounter, Brian opened the gateway into the world of educational ethnography and of an ideological model of literacy; both of which were to challenge and completely alter how I viewed and experienced, and continue to experience, my professional reality.

This sequence of events seems to embody many of the attributes he brought to his role in supporting research and researchers at King's: his connection 'on the ground' with schools and practitioners; his readiness to listen and to be genuinely curious about what they were doing; his encouragement and generosity with those taking their first tentative steps into research themselves; and the opening up of completely new ways of seeing, thinking, and being.

At the time of my meeting with Brian, I was working with a small group of self-selecting teachers from different curriculum areas in a multi-cultural comprehensive school in west London where we were exploring a particular model of Critical Thinking to inform our A level subject teaching. This work had been prompted by a specific concern of the apparent inability of a number of our students from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds to transfer their high academic achievement at the age of 16 in English public exams, known as the General Certificate of Education (GCSE), into corresponding achievement at the highest grades at Advanced Level (A Level) at the age of 18. To achieve such grades, they would be expected to demonstrate an ability to think synoptically, present arguments, and support such arguments with reasoning as determined by the context of the subject. For us, this was above all, a social equalities issue as by not achieving such grades, these students had limited access to the more competitive degrees courses and universities, where high examination grades are a basic entry requirement. As a result of my own research into Critical Thinking, I had developed a Critical Thinking professional development programme with the aim of promoting an approach to subject A Level teaching that would foster amongst our students greater intellectual engagement; conceptual understanding and associated academic discourse which we thought might open up higher levels of achievement at A level. This was in fact the main reason for my decision to focus my doctoral study on the teaching of Critical Thinking.

In this context, Brian's scholarship in the field of ethnography and in terms of his conceptualisation of an ideological model of literacy provided me with the framework with which to explore what teachers were actually *doing* with Critical Thinking in their classrooms, and a lens through which to trace the dynamics at play in the context of that '*doing*'. As an outcome of this research, my own understanding of what Critical Thinking is; its manifestation in the classroom; and the primacy of the role of the teacher underwent a radical change, which has continued to affect my subsequent work as a teacher, school leader, and teacher trainer.

At the outset of my work with my Critical Thinking group, I had not questioned my view of Critical Thinking as a set, fixed body of knowledge existing independently of context. This fixed view was very soon challenged! As a result of the ethnographic approach adopted in my research, under Brian's guidance, and by exploring in detail what teachers were actually doing with this body of knowledge called Critical thinking, I was able to see how it actually manifested itself in the context of live classrooms in a range of subject settings. It became clear through the research that teachers were involved in their own individual process of interpreting, selecting, reformulating and blending different aspects of the Critical Thinking model with other pedagogical conventions to address very specific epistemological difficulties presented by their A Level specifications for their students. In other words, Critical Thinking assumed its significance and meaning through each teacher's translation of it into the context of their subject specific practice, rather than being pursued as an independent pedagogic aim in its own right, adjacent to subject content. Critical thinking, therefore, was not 'independent' of the subject, it was something malleable in the hands of teachers who did not 'teach' critical thinking, but selected and adapted aspects of the

Critical Thinking model to make accessible to their students the more demanding aspects of their particular subject at A Level.

One illustrative example of this would be the work of an A Level politics teacher whose students struggled in moving from organising a plethora of factual content beyond description into analytical, reasoned arguments. In order to address this, he drew on a particular feature of the Critical Thinking model to organise content around what he identified as fundamental concepts which, in his teaching of the politics of the USA, comprised: power, representation, accountability, democracy, pluralism, participation and rights. As a result, whenever students engaged in content, for example, reading about a particular political or historical episode or discussing the position of particular party on a specific issue, that content was framed within the perspective of these core concepts. This led, over time, to students being able to adopt independently an analytical stance whether it be through reading, discussing or through their own writing, thus supporting the type of thinking and writing required for the highest grades in A Level politics.

The account of literacy practices presented in my research instantiates Street's ideological view of literacy and notably its iteration in educational institutional contexts in the form of Academic Literacies in several ways. As illustrated above, teachers' approaches were part of distinctive classroom practices shaped by specific epistemological issues presented by the subject for their students. This disciplinary ideological perspective also ran alongside the institutional concerns of raising achievement at A Level, given the role of A Level as gatekeeper to university entrance. In this way, the ideological dimension of the practices teachers adopted can be traced from the institutional culture of the school and its concerns with examination outcomes, informed by a wider government policy framework where high stakes assessments in the form of A Levels determine access to university. The Critical Thinking programme I led was also institutionally endorsed as a means through which to address the issue of academic performance at A Level.

Critical Thinking therefore assumes an ideological dimension both in terms of the rationale for its use in an institutional environment, and in a disciplinary regime whereby its rendering by the teacher into distinctive pedagogic practices is executed to enable students to engage with the specific epistemological demands of the discipline as framed by the A Level exam. However, it was the role of teacher agency which emerged from this process as the most powerful finding for me. Whilst teachers are influenced by classroom and educational contexts; they are not solely instruments of such pressures- far from it. Indeed, within the context of my study, the key players were not, in the end, the Critical Thinking model nor the A Level examinations, but the teachers themselves who were the agents through which Critical Thinking as an abstract theoretical construct was transformed into their own enacted pedagogy.

I owe such a debt of gratitude to Brian who set me on this path; who gave me a voice, and in turn, gave a voice and honoured the work of those teachers in the study. By paying attention to what was going on in the classroom and by listening to the teachers and the students, I was able to move beyond reified notions of disciplines and examinations and their influence on pedagogy. In so doing I was empowered to put human agency at the heart of classroom teaching and learning.

A Personal Reflection

Simon Coffey

I first met Brian when I attended the interview for my appointment as lecturer in modern languages education at King's. Brian was on the interview panel. He struck me immediately as an avuncular, professorial figure and while this initial impression endured, I soon grew to see far beyond my own clichéd stereotyping. For the interview I was required to present my proposal for PhD study and I remember Brian taking me to task on my rather blasé use of the word "self" in my presentation, asking "how are you using the term 'self'?". This was typical of the incisive but gentle style of questioning that Brian slipped into conversation and that encouraged a reflection on the terms we use. Brian paid attention to the ways words are used in different contexts, knowing that language represents and constructs social meaning in everyday lives.

Brian, the director of the research group I was attached to, was my PhD supervisor and, before long, a valued friend. We both lived in Brighton and frequently shared train journeys to and from London. In Brighton we would often meet in his flat on the seafront, in his beach hut or in a restaurant, his favourite being a Thai restaurant round the corner from where he lived. These meetings initially started as PhD supervisions and

progressed onto more open exchanges as friends and colleagues. Meetings with Brian always combined social and intellectual perspectives. He really did live as an ethnographer, and unsurprisingly always emphasised the "ethnographic dimension" in his teaching and PhD supervision. Research and intellectual work were not a job for him in the sense of a separate professional activity, but his scholarship and his life were intertwined.

When I reflect on the 15 years I knew Brian the impact of his personal and intellectual perspectives on my own scholarship were not clear to me at the time. It is only looking back I see how I absorbed almost by osmosis the shifts in my thinking from contact alongside him. My background was teaching languages (English as a foreign language and then French and Spanish within the school system) and I was totally new to the world of research and academic practices when I joined King's. The goal of my doctoral research was to examine why some people from British, monolingual family backgrounds are motivated to study foreign languages. I see now that I had first approached the question of my PhD research from an individualist psycholinguistic perspective, my (seemingly common sense!) frames of reference having been forged through my undergraduate and Masters studies in applied linguistics which offered a view of second language learning at that time almost entirely steeped in psycholinguistics.

My engagement with Brian's ideas broadened my thinking towards a more social, constructivist understanding of action in the world. One of Brian's common injunctions was "let's unpack that" meaning let's examine the frames of reference being brought to articulate a problem and the mode of enquiry. This promoted a meta-awareness and a greater sensitivity to context. From setting out to look at individual predispositions toward language study I moved to a more ecological frame through the use of autobiographical accounts, then still very much a novelty in the then highly psychologised approaches to Second Language Acquisition research and suspected as a not altogether legitimate source of data. As my analysis of autobiographical accounts progressed, I was drawn more to question the discursive and material constraints and affordances shaping the social and cultural habitus of the participants I was eliciting stories from. As mentioned, Brian always emphasised to me that terms are not neutral, that each term draws on an epistemological tradition and that the meaning of each term is never fixed. This helped me think more carefully about my own use of conceptual descriptors like 'identity' or 'culture' (which Brian beautifully characterised as being "a verb"), and also to hear more sympathetically the words used by my participants as inscribed in a particular (performative and socio-culturally sanctioned) relation of telling.

Brian kept several arch-lever files with photocopies of articles and book chapters that he would give to PhD students to help stimulate our thinking. These key texts would act as a springboard for discussion and I would be invited to connect the key themes to my own work. Brian had been impressed by the concept of figured worlds as elaborated by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) in their seminal book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds,* and this ultimately provided me with a conceptual framework of social and cultural identity that I went on to apply to my analysis of autobiographical accounts of language learning.

Although I'm not sure Brian ever used the term 'post-structuralist' to describe his own work in literacy, the term has been applied to his development of autonomous vs ideological bodies of knowledge and social practices. This distinction continues to guide my ongoing work in modern languages research, leading me to ask questions about how centripetal structures such as 'a national curriculum' or a school subject such as 'French' are curricularised, what ideologies shape the process of curricularisation, and how this curricularised knowledge is realised and taken up by different stakeholders. I continue to read Brian and to be nourished by his thinking. It's impossible to measure the debt I owe him and how his influence may have rippled out to the teachers and students I work with. I think of him often, especially as I walk past his seafront flat in Brighton, recalling the hours spent chatting at his beach hut where he would invite people to stop by and have a drink, or going to see jazz at a local pub and musing about the Labour Party, definitions of social class, his fandom of Manchester United and films that he had just seen.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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