CHAPTER 3

MEDIATION IS THE MESSAGE

Interview with Ivor Goodson by Daniel Feldman and Mariano Palamidessi.
Published (in Spanish) in Revista del Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación, Año IX, No 17. Buenos Aires, December 2000

QUESTION: We found very interesting your idea about the ‘crisis of positionality’ and the way in which this processes can change the sense of our practices and discourses...

IVOR: Let me give you an example. The National Health service was a democratic invention, in 1945, of the Labour government where the rich and the poor were in beds together, waited on by nurses, and my wife use to be one of those nurses, who could give equal treatment, in the same room, to rich and poor. So it was a democratic health service. But since the conservatives took over in 1979, with Thatcher, the health service has been transformed into a privatised situation: the rich in one room or in a different hospital, the poor in other hospitals. So my wife, even if she’s in the same hospital, her work has been repositioned. She’s either now just serving the rich, or the poor. But I mean, she’s no longer dispensing democratic health care, equal to all, and inclusive. She’s just giving second rate health care, reduced health care, under-financed health care to the poor people. So even though she believes the same things, she’s in the same hospital ward, with the same beds, her work has been repositioned. And that’s the crisis of positionality. We haven’t changed, our own identity, our own beliefs, our own ideology, our own personal project is the same, but it’s been repositioned. We can hold on to our own beliefs, but if we do not contest structural change, we are repositioned, in spite of our beliefs.

QUESTION: And how do you see the impact on the curriculum theory?

IVOR: I think it’s very similar. Let’s change the map again so, the year is 1965, I’m teaching in a complementary school, the room is full of rich children, poor children, children with high academic ability, children with less defined academic ability. We teach them all equally, we attempt to create an inclusive pedagogy. And it’s a mixed ability classroom. Now, if I were in the same classroom, the rich would have gone away to a private school, the middle class would have gone to a charter school, I would be left in a school essentially for the poor in the wrong part of town, with less resources. I would still be believing in the same things, still believing in democratic schooling, still wanting to include everybody, but everybody wouldn’t be there.

QUESTION: But the questions are if our beliefs are the same or they have been changed, and if we shall support in a political way our own beliefs and how.
IVOR: Whether our beliefs are the same? I suppose when I say our beliefs are the same, I mean our big beliefs. For example, that you treat everybody equally or that everybody has equal power. Our big beliefs remain the same, but our strategic responses have changed. As I said to you, the belief in progressive pedagogy was the correct belief in the early sixties, because inclusive possibilities were there. So our belief was equal to our position. Now our position have change. We have to adapt the belief in some way. Actually the big belief is the same, the aspiration is the same, to treat everybody equally, but because of the substantial repositioning, there are two different ways to respond. I’m mentioning here (Briend)’s distinction between pre-figurative politics and strategic politics. The strategic politics is: you take a new situation and you work out a way in which your beliefs are reactivated in the new situation. You find a new way to speak about what you believe in. And that may mean changing your strategic position on, say, progressive pedagogy. We are not talking about changing our beliefs. We are saying: at this moment that doesn’t work anymore. But that’s a strategic point, not an ideological point, and that’s a very important distinction. Strategically we are saying, “It’s no good any more”. That wouldn’t deliver the belief by now. So he said: there are two ways that you do politics in a situation where you don’t like your positionality. One is you invent a new strategic politics, you involve yourself in some way in contesting the things that are creating a bad position. And he says the other possibility is what he calls pre-figurative politics, where you find, once again, a room or space where all of those things that you believe in can be done. So you bring together all the different children in one room, all the different students in one room. And just in that room you do what you believe, for example, that you should deal equally with everything. Let’s see a simple situation: you have a lecture, and there are all sorts of people in a lecture, people from different races and different classes come to the lecture. And at the front the professor is sitting, the professors ask most of the questions, but you deliberately disrupt the (...) of the room by asking to the class, by asking somebody in back what they think. You bring in, you include all the people in the room. In some symbolic way, the janitor comes and you thank him for your coffee, you speak to him in front of everybody. You’re doing pre-figurative politics in that moment by saying “what I believe in is to include everybody in the room, and I’ll make sure that if somebody is making a special claim for privilege, I’ll disrupt now: “thank you professor for your prestigious question, what do you think at the back?” That is, just in a moment, trying to do pre-figurative politics. You can be more substantial than that, you can try and create that room permanently, but that’s pre-figurative politics, where you’re showing people “this, in this moment is what I believe about the world”. So that’s different in a way from strategic politics, that’s saying this is my honest belief, this is how I deal with people, I believe in all to be equal, and in second stage it means that you act equally with them. So it’s a daily politics.

QUESTION: Then, when we are speaking about pre-figurative politics, are we speaking also about micro politics?

IVOR: Let’s think about three levels: macro, mezzo and micro. Strategic politics, from my point of view, moves as far up from the micro as it can go. If you remember