PIET-HEIN VAN DE VEN AND BRENTON DOECKE

1. OPENING THEIR TEACHING UP TO SCRUTINY

This book arises out of a conversation that began in 1999, when Piet-Hein van de Ven and Brenton Doecke first met in Amsterdam at a conference of the International Association for the Improvement of Mother Tongue Education (IAIMTE). IAIMTE is a network established by Gert Rijlaarsdam (the Netherlands) and Ken Watson (Australia) in a bid to break down the parochialism that inheres within Mother Tongue (or L-1) education, and to provide a forum for conversations (in English) across linguistic boundaries.

Piet-Hein brought to his conversation with Brenton extensive experience as a researcher in another network, namely the International Mother Tongue Education Network (or IMEN), including a set of protocols for classroom observation, a strong commitment to collaborative inquiry between academic researchers and school teachers, and a rigorously theorised approach to comparative research in L-1 or Mother Tongue education (see Herrlitz, Ongstad and van de Ven, 2007). Brenton was, at the time, editor of *English in Australia*, the journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, and he was heavily engaged in debates about English curriculum and pedagogy vis-à-vis attempts by Australian governments to introduce standards-based reforms (Darling-Hammond, 2004, Jones, 2010). The upshot of this conversation between us – a conversation that has been resumed at various times over the intervening years, and in places as diverse as Nijmegen, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Albi and Toronto – was a research project involving Prue Gill and Bella Illesca, two English teachers based in Melbourne, and Ramon Groenendijk and Mies Pols, two Dutch teachers who worked in een school voor voortgezet onderwijs (a secondary school) near Nijmegen. The aim was to conduct a comparative study of the teaching of literature in Australia and Holland, using the protocols for classroom observation and inquiry developed by IMEN. Prue and Bella and Ramon and Mies agreed to develop accounts (or ‘cases’) of teaching literature in their respective settings. Bella acted as Prue’s ‘critical friend’ in developing the Australian case, visiting her school over a number of weeks and engaging in extensive conversations with her before and after each of the lessons she observed. Piet-Hein played a similar role with Ramon and Mies in preparing the Dutch case. When they had written their cases, the Dutch and Australian teachers then read each other’s writing, engaging in conversations that captured their sense of the similarities and differences between their pedagogies as teachers of literature.

Although they were immersed in the immediacy of their day-to-day professional lives, Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies still found time to reflect on their professional
practice as teachers of literature, opening their teaching up to scrutiny by others and interrogating the assumptions behind their pedagogies. They were prepared to inquire into what their activities could mean for their students and what the value of a ‘literary’ education might be within society as a whole, believing that reflection of this kind is an integral part of their role as teachers. Such professional reflection cannot be taken for granted. Recently many educational systems have implemented standards-based reforms and other measures for regulating education, including accountability mechanisms like the Program for International Student Assessment (or PISA), administered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as standardised testing developed at a national level (Australia, for example, has recently witnessed the introduction of the National Assessment Project – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] [see http://www.naplan.edu.au/]). A consequence of these reforms for teachers is that their capacities are stretched to the limit as they endeavour to meet the performance benchmarks imposed on them, while trying to maintain an ethical commitment to the welfare of the young people in their care. It is not only the sheer busy-ness that is imposed on teachers that closes off the possibility of critical inquiry, but the way standards-based reforms define a set of educational outcomes (including a certain construction of ‘literacy’) that people are not allowed to question. Standards-based reforms make it increasingly difficult for teachers to interrogate the meaning of what they do, both at the level of their capacity to respond to the needs of individual students (What can I do to help this particular person? Is the curriculum I provide sufficiently inclusive?) and at the level of thinking about the significance of their work as it contributes to the complex process by which a society reproduces itself through its school system (what social good does literature teaching serve?). The policy language used to describe education increasingly reflects a market mentality, including talk of inputs and outputs, investment and efficiency, of serving ‘clients’ and ‘value-adding’, at the expense of attending to the culturally specific nature of classroom interactions and the personal needs of individual students. Teachers are required to accept pre-determined educational outcomes, such as those enshrined in PISA and other forms of standardised testing, as a given, as though the manner in which these tests construct literacy ability is universally applicable.

By raising questions about what it means to teach literature, Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies have been challenging the ‘new orthodoxy’ of performance appraisal and international comparisons which suppose that everything can be reduced to the same scale of measurement, regardless of specific national contexts (Jones, 2010, p. 14). They were mindful of the value of comparative research, both as a means of recognising the specific character of their educational traditions, and of making their habitual practices and assumptions ‘strange’ by viewing them from the standpoint of others working in a different cultural setting. The conversations and writing in which they have engaged might accordingly be read as exploring the possibility of maintaining a professionally reflexive approach to their own teaching (i.e. a ‘praxis’) at a time when enormous pressures exist to simply do what you are told without questioning.