

# Can Carnival save us from the Masquerade? Epic texts, teacher education and the formation of a personal philosophy.

CHRIS NAUGHTON

NEW ZEALAND TERTIARY COLLEGE

## Abstract

*It is now common within teacher education to ask students to keep a journal so that they reflect on their own personal philosophy while working in the community. It is unlikely however that this reflection will be critical, discursive or substantive. Owing to the narrative within which students are enframed, the implication is that the 'epic text,' to use Bakhtin's terminology, acts as a single unified prescription for teacher education. Sadly within this narrative, students are unable to question the philosophical premise in which they are enframed. What is suggested in this paper is that by adopting 'novel texts' that is a wider perception and interpretation of knowledge, students may seek to question the authority of the text and develop a multiplicity of readings. In the process, as Bakhtin points out, it is hoped that a community may evolve, where, as in carnival, a breaking of rules and conventions may come about. Learning that demands active engagement on the part of the student may challenge the masquerade of uniformity and uncritical compliance that currently persists.*

## Introduction

The role of the teaching placement acts as a time when education students not only develop their competence as teachers start their journey in formulating their perspective on what it is to teach and be a teacher. The experience of working in the field is a time when the educational theory comes to the fore in how a student might read their school, class or centre. The experience of reflection is often however compromised by the pressure to fulfil graduating standards and the approach taken in the workplaces where performance outweighs all other considerations. This paper considers the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and in particular his study of the novel and epic text. By examining Bakhtin's work on the role and history of the text this allows for students to re-examine their engagement with the text and the possibility that through their own engagement with texts they can produce theory and tasks of their own making.

## The Epic in Bakhtin

For Bakhtin the epic text is an account of the absolute past. That is the transferal of a represented world infinitely removed from a discourse "about contemporary topics as contemporary" (Bakhtin, 1982:15). The space between the epic and the listener he saw as "filled with national tradition" (1982:15). This way of looking, reminiscent of the Greek portrayal of the hero, saw the world in the sense of the given or the predictable ordering of events. For Bakhtin to gather any personal experience within the event it is necessary to step outside this epic tradition. While it is possible to do this, many maintain an historic distance and by doing so historicize their lives and their perceptions of themselves. This according to Bakhtin necessitates a removal of the self from one's own presentness and pastness.

Bakhtin makes a political comment that it is the ruling class in a society or country that belong to the patriarchal tradition that espouses the epic. It is the epic that speaks of the deeds of the fathers that are separated from today and celebrated as those who are removed and yet revered. As the epic is historical in its inception of the hero of the epic, even in any seemingly contemporary context, is a form that Bakhtin claims is "already completed, finished and generic form" (1982:15). The epic hero might typically be a sports idol, who is looked upon in awe. In New Zealand the rugby player and the narration of the match exemplifies the hero, linked to an historic past that is removed and detached from the everyday.

The epic past is seen by Bakhtin as “monochromatic, valorized and hierarchical” (1982:16) lacking any relativity. This distance he describes as “walled off” (1982:16) from the present. It is thus compared to a circle lacking in any penetration and importantly denying itself any sense of continuation of “all rights of any real continuation” (1982:16). Yet this disjunction means little, as tradition is felt so strongly within the national psyche. It is unquestionable and thus remains unquestioned and by inference also unevaluatable. How can an evaluation be undertaken of something that denies itself to its own being as it is so ingrained in the national unconscious?

Bakhtin sees how an act or deed changes to become epic, “beyond the realm of human activity, the realm in which everything humans touch is altered and re-thought” (1982:17). With reference to the sporting hero this seems apt as heroic distance provides the opportunity to reinforce a view of the world that fuses the subject with the adulation. Hence the rugby hero becomes not only a media text but a way of being that is fused within the popular notion of what it is to be.

It is interesting to speculate on the validity of past history and the disregard for the present in time. As Bakhtin suggests, in the Middle Ages the present does not figure as an available object. In the way the epic was perceived and masked as the past, the perception is once again that the past has a finished quality. It is felt that this finality, lack of circumspection and distance still maintains today, aligning the person or object in the past as if in a display cabinet. The concept is one where to look is accepted but not to touch. This removal and finished character prevents engaging with those around the work. The concept of the museum piece is useful in describing this non-engagement with the epic object. For Bakhtin all epic works become display objects and as such do not relate to the present in how they are.

### **The Novel in Bakhtin**

The novel, in Bakhtin’s view, is the means whereby expression of the personal, the contemporary and the open-ended dialogue can be made prominent. The origins of the novel reveal for Bakhtin the basis on which the claim is made. Bakhtin saw the novel as arising from the carnivalesque festivals stretching back to the time of the Greeks. This carnivalesque posture of ridicule later infused writers and commentators and became the origin of the novel and novelistic. The lineage of the carnivalesque shows the novel like the carnival as a means to counter the prevailing epic totality of distance, hierarchy and closure.

Bakhtin saw the distinction of the novel from the epic in that the novel is determined by lived experience, knowledge and practice. Above all when the novel “becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline” (1982:15). This is said as the novel is grounded in lived experience and defines itself as a study of knowledge arising from the personal experience of being. In this way what it is that the individual believes is recognised as a viable means of making meaning. Subsequent theory making of knowledge can then be treated against a lived experience of what a student perceives according to their own perception. Knowledge is not ascribed as it reveals an epic text but provides questions on what is knowledge, thus becomes engaged at the intersection of a student’s own theory making and practice. The process is one of engaged dialogue with the self and others not a re-imposition of an epic text.

The personal and recounting of events observed within the contemporary is seen by Bakhtin in the memoir - the diary. A personal account that is not in any way heroized but is autobiographical. It is mundane at times but reflects a personal memory unrestricted by chronology and pattern concerning only a personal view. This Bakhtin sees as “exclusive and comic familiarity,” to which, “must be added an intense sense of enquiry and a utopian fantasy” (1982:26). The laughter, which here can be perceived as how the author wishes to observe the world without the restrictions or impediment of tradition or memory. Bakhtin writes: “The plane of comic (humorous) representation is a specific plane in its spatial as well as its temporal aspect. Here the role of memory is minimal: in the comic world there is nothing for memory and tradition. One ridicules in order to forget” (1982:23). Bakhtin maintained that through laughter European civilisation has developed: “Familiarisation of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and

indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilisation" (1982:23). He cites many varied forms of serio-comic genre that exemplify the novel texts or the origin of the novel. The mimes of the Sophron, that were mentioned by Plato as weak mimes that took as their subject everyday life. Bakhtin cites the Socratic dialogues as typical of the novel in its sense of parody. The relationship that these writings have to the modern novel is such that everyday reality is revealed as laughter to be read as a critical view of the world, destroying the hierarchical and the distance felt by those attending the work. In the Socratic dialogues we find the hero, Socrates, speaking of himself in an anti hero fashion. At the same time, while he poses as the wise man he also becomes the magrit – the Greek mask that depicts the fool, and as a wise fool (1982:21). Here is the ambivalence that is inherent in the novelistic script.

Menippean satire that includes Boethius and Petronius is offered by Bakhtin as a realistic portrayal of Roman life and overall conditions of being: "In Menippean satire the unfettered and fantastic plots and situations all serve one goal – to put to the test and to expose ideas and ideologues" (1982:26). Menippean satire was closely associated with the Roman feast of Saturnalia and Saturnalian laughter. Bakhtin adds that the Menippean plots saw the author as amongst other things being at the same time in his account of his tales, reducing heroes to the everyday status. This means of inclusiveness and the autobiographical account is again a device that is relevant to the novel.

For Bakhtin contemporaneity could not be epic as it is art of a lower order: "The precept is transitory it is flow it is an eternal continuation without: beginning or end; It is denied authentic conclusiveness and consequently lacks an essence as well" (1982: 20). The necessity for laughter was seen as a means to balance the epic within society.

The unchanging nature of the hero lead Bakhtin to consider how an epic hero cannot improvise outside of the plot. He therefore dies as the plot disappears. Yet the Pulcinello, Maccus or Harlequin remains contemporary and lives on despite the plot. The clown is not in other words only at the service of the plot and hidebound by the plot. In the novel it is thus an ambivalence of the hero that comes to the fore not the invincibility. The sense of the future beyond the work is envisaged in the novel and with that the inconclusiveness and incongruity of life, depicted as an unrealised potential.

In the novel according to Bakhtin, there always remained an unfulfilled quality a sense that the future is required to fulfil the story. The epic man in the novel is no longer impregnable and the 'wholeness' (37) of the individual breaks down. This is a tension Bakhtin sees developing between man and his external being and man's internal being. Within this portrait of the hero also comes the ideologue, who seeks to effect change over not only the protagonist but 'the nature of his own image' (1982:38). As a way to frame this image of the hero Bakhtin proposes that this view of the new hero is portrayed as contemporaneity for its own sake (that is to say makes no claim on future memory). Thus the contemporary hero is moulded in clay as opposed to contemporaneity for the future (for descendants), which is moulded in "marble or bronze" (1982:19).

### **The Carnival and the Carnavalesque**

As a point of departure an article by Shanti Elliott (1999) on Bakhtin and the puppet show is referenced at this point. Elliott's emphasis is on the context of Bakhtin's study of Rabelais (1984) and his text on the grotesque. Without going into too much detail Rabelais questions the conventions of the time and mocks the nobility in Renaissance France. The carnival here becomes the spilling out from possibility to improbability. Laughter reduces the sense of fear and authority to nought, defending human freedom where through the ritual of the carnival in excess there is a becoming a renewal of being.

Within the telling of Rabelais' carnival Bakhtin saw several new roles for the audience. The Harlequin figure and Pulcinello present examples to Bakhtin of the way in which the audience, in a performance, play a major role. The many levels of double meaning and local inference that are part of the puppet's performance serve to render the audience not as passive but as a reading audience able to read the text as it plays out in

their particular circumstance. Elliott makes reference to the way in which the audience in Bakhtin's characterization of Petruska acts as interlocutor. The audience reads differences between the "puppet language and the human language, marking the space of 'play' " (1999:136). This creates an ambivalent domain of meaning where words take on a new significance. The role of the audience here is to take a creative role to make sense between the systems language, that depict an authoritarian view of the world, and one that is governed by local meaning. The constructed meaning in this space identifies the plight or the position of those who may be the oppressed in every other circumstance. Bakhtin in his reference to dialogue sees the puppet figure, or the equivalent today, as the person who through the power of laughter illuminates the socio-economic distinctions and distance felt by a population. As Roberto da Matta (1991) (cited in Elliott) noted when writing on Brazilian carnival, the reversal factor is one that is uppermost in the carnival. The poorest members of a samba school might be chosen to play royalty for the day in the samba parade and the message of the song might well reflect the sentiment that while we may be poor in wealth we may be rich in other respects.

### **The Reflective Teacher and Bakhtin**

Currently teacher education students are asked to embark on their reflections, that includes an outline of their own personal philosophy, when they are on placement in either school or in my work the Early Childhood Centre. The tasks that they have to fulfil require them to reflect on their practice in a number of different capacities. The students consider the philosophy of the school or centre setting and write reflections on their practice with a view to increasing their ability to reflect as practitioners. There are a number of difficulties faced by teachers in this exercise and this will be explained with reference to the main discussion of Bakhtin at length.

Student teachers are characterised in the literature in various ways. For some the student teacher appears to be little more than a utility. As Stout (1989) observed: "For the past two decades investigative study of student teacher training has concentrated on the other end of the spectrum: student teaching behaviours and their relation to classroom effectiveness" (1989:522). For others the student teacher is the person who struggles within a deeply conservative workforce whereby technical rationality and the "techniques of teaching often become ends in themselves rather than a means to some reasoned educational purpose." (Down and Hogan, 1999) (cited in Down and Hogan) It is this last observation that gives pause for thought. If student teachers are to be reflective practitioners how is that to be achieved when the prevailing sentiment is one of utility rather than any underlying inference as to the role of education within a community?

This perception of utility can lead to student teachers adopting the same approach of the workforce. This often becomes a skills based approach that pays little heed to what may be perceived in any reflective sense. More alarmingly the report by Grundy and Hatton (1995) showed that "both teacher educators and student teachers are limited in their capacity to recognise or comment upon the way their lives and work are being influenced by their class, gender and ethnicity" (133). This seems to accord with the observation by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) who observe "new social identities or new kinds of workers are being created to meet the needs of global capitalism" (xiv). The opportunity to see beyond the epic narrative of government standards and centre or school practice linked to learning outcomes and skills is an almost impossible task for the well meaning student. What then is the literature provided for the trainers and the trainees to consider when preparing for the work placement?

### **The Reflective Literature and the Bildungsman**

If we turn to the literature what is there that may reassure us that the concept of implicating the individual is underpinned in the literature? Is it that the literature allows a wider brief than one that sees the individual response sacrificed by the need to remain distant, detached and aloof from the perception of the person? Is it that the literature will reassure us that reflections see working with others to participate in the process of being as opposed to remaining mute in the interchange? Is it that the novel can be realised in this work or is it that graduating standards and institutional protection rank higher and reduce the writing to the epic.

Much of the literature on reflection in early childhood education goes back to John Dewey (1933) and Donald Schon (1983). From Dewey the view of teaching and open-mindedness thinking of how others may feel, responsibility and careful consideration of an action before and after is prevalent. Whole heartedness, that is consideration of what is taken from the past and adds as you build a future is also promoted by Dewey. From Schon we learn reflection in action and reflection on action. There are others including Smyth (1989) who advocates a model whereby students: describe, analyse, theorise and act. Another model is Brookfields' (1995) where the students own autobiography is considered then that of the experience through the children's eyes, work colleagues and finally backing up ideas with theoretical literature. Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides different levels of reflection. Level one: values, beliefs and attitudes, level two: physical environment plus local community and perspectives of others, level three: matching of the student worker within the 'philosophy' of the centre and level four: the general view of education held by the nation the image of the educator in the national psyche - thus government regulations and centre philosophy come into play.

While these texts suggest that students develop an account of their teaching experience in terms of the novelistic the overriding pressure to conform and not to 'rock the boat' would seem to be overwhelming from the research. What it seems is called for is an engagement with the experience whereby critique and open dialogue is encouraged not a careful masquerade to show that the appropriate 'theoretically informed' tasks or mimicry has been adopted. To know what the theory means is to understand that theory making changes according to the circumstance of the place in which the theory is being adopted.

The thread of Bakhtin's work has been to emphasise the person in the story of themselves. The link that Bakhtin makes is to the past yet he links history to the past, not as a rarefied set of epic texts but the past as contributing to how we see the future.

In his text the Bildungsroman (2002) Bakhtin makes the case for his final version of the novel:

Along with this predominant, mass type, there is another incomparably rarer type of novel that provides an image of man in the process of becoming. As opposed to a static unity here one finds a dynamic unity in the hero's image. The hero himself, his character, becomes a variable in the formula of this type of novel. Changes in the hero himself acquire plot significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed. Time is introduced into man, enters into his very image, changing in a fundamental way the significance of all aspects of his destiny and life. This type of novel can be designated in the most general sense as the novel of human emergence (2002:21).

This term emergence, one that is frequently used in education, can be seen in this context as the teacher as emergent. The requirement here is not for a detached epic review of the student as the accountable isolated individual but seen in the light of becoming. The emergence sees the individual in the collective shift that occurs within society and the individual changing as society changes around him or her. As Bakhtin put it: "He emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (2002:23). It is this wider recognition of the student as the audience and the entertainer in the Pulcinello. The life story of the student informs what the student will see. By learning about themselves within the scope of their environment students may start to see who they are and how they came to be within a present that is vital and informed. Their vision is not clouded by the sense of epic directives to achieve goals in reviewing their own skills but a vision where they can see themselves as capable of making their own decisions. The political need not be shrouded from students as Bakhtin adds in discussing the novel: "Finally, there are socioeconomic contradictions – those motive forces of development – from elementary immediate visual contrasts (the social diversity of the homeland on the high road) to their more profound and refined manifestations in human relations and ideas" (2002:23).

This envelopment of the individual is in composing their own history and being present in the moment. Referring to Schon's concept of reflection in practice Bakhtin recalls Goethe and observes:

In crossing the Alps, he observes the movement of the clouds and the atmosphere 'around the mountains,' and he creates his own theory of the emergence of weather. Plainsmen have good or bad weather in ready-made form, but in the mountains people are present during its emergence (2002: 29).

In linking the metaphor to the subject of teaching placement can we say that the student to be immersed in practice create their own theory? As Bakhtin maintains in referring to the above: "The scientific groundlessness of their hypothesis is quite unimportant to us here. What is important are the characteristic features of Goethe's way of seeing" (2002:29). For the students their theorising becomes necessary if they are to be immersed in what is it that they are engaged in doing. It is as suggested by Curtis and Carter (2008): "Your teacher behaviours must go beyond herding children through typical activities and outcomes associated with the early childhood curriculum. Then, as Thich Nhat Hanh suggests, you can let go of preoccupations and go back to yourself to really see children and the deep joy in this work" (2008:86).

Bakhtin saw the past as connected to the present and in doing so allowing those that wish to see the connections between themselves history and the present. It is this understanding of history that brings a reinterpretation of the present and projection into the future. In a reference to the local, history and the coincidence of the present Bakhtin suggests: "The creative past must be revealed as necessary and productive under the conditions of a given locality, as a creative humanization of this locality, which transforms a portion of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people, into a corner of the historical world" (2002: 34).

Just for a moment let's hold and consider what is vital about teaching. Yes it is vital to consider teaching in terms of being able to organise time and manage. Yes it is important to be able to reflect on teaching episodes in the episode and on the episode and to be able to look into what may transpire from the episode but this all seems to be detached from the personal or the memoir as Bakhtin has put it. In addition the accusation of seeing the present in historical terms would seem to fit, as the contemporaneous is enframed by rules regulations and prescription that prevents the memoir from appearing.

What then is inferred in reading Bakhtin that can be taken as any indication for what might be seen as change that may be of value? Bakhtin suggests the novel as the ground for re-evaluating the engagement with the self. This allows the past not to be seen as dominating the text but the past being seen as something that involves the telling of the story. The text is to be in other words a memoir, something that has the imprint of the writers own concern and personal to that writer. The use of the contemporaneous is to be acknowledged in the text and the personal telling reveals the view of the feeling of the contemporaneous, not only who but where the location of the writing is acknowledged.

## **Conclusion**

The carnival and the carnivalesque is regarded as uncontrolled limitless and anti-authoritarian. The development from the Greek festival to the carnivalesque in the novel is one that Bakhtin elaborates in an extraordinary fashion. The elements that make up the grotesque include as disparate elements as the Socratic dialogues to Pulcinello shows on the street. Bakhtin elaborates in his narrative the many perspectives of the novel text that emerge to challenge the acceptance of the epic text.

When embarking on their placements, students gain the opportunity to not only look to developing their skills in teaching but the chance to see how any theory of the past and their own theory making might develop. By looking to Bakhtin's idea of the novel text the worth of their own writing becomes self-evident. This alone is not the ambition sought by Bakhtin in looking to the novel as a place where making theory of their own within the context of the present is the ambition. As in Goethe making hypothesis on the weather it is not as Bakhtin points out the theory it is in the making of the theory that learning occurs. It might be answered that this is already provided for in the texts outlines in the paper. That might be the case provided the support is maintained within the placement. Where there is not the support there may well as Down and Hogan (1999) report be little choice but to follow current practice found in the centre. To rectify this practice the radical idea from Bahktn would be to see the life history of the student as informing their placement

what they wish to observe, what they may wish to study. As Bakhtin remarks the way of looking is not to see themselves as removed from the plot but implicated in the plot. Bakhtin adds: “Time is introduced into man, enters into his very image, changing in a fundamental way the significance of all aspects of his destiny and life. This type of novel can be designated in the most general sense as the novel of human emergence” (2002: 21). The regard for what happens is seen in relation to the individuals and their history of learning how they have changed and what they wish to focus on.

If looking at themselves can be radically shifted perhaps the texts themselves that inform reflection ought to be considered in the same light. The writing by Dewey the circumstances surrounding his writing and the time of writing all draw the epic into the presence of the local context, which is again a condition for revealing in Bakhtin. This drawing the texts into the current domain for critical response reduces the text to the everyday and as such removes the imperatives of ‘epic’ one line boxes to which students can be subjected.

Perhaps most importantly the way in which the texts are brought to bear for students might also be considered in the light of students’ ability to research what they may wish to pursue. To follow the fashion of the time is not necessarily the most appropriate means to develop a way to question the basis of the written word. Perhaps the means by which schools have come about, how teachers think as teachers, why students become teachers might be asked. Even the origin of the text might be of value and one that may stimulates the veracity of texts that are seen by some as prescriptive and others as epic.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. (1982). Epic and Novel, In *The Dialogic Imagination*, M. Holquist (Ed.) translated by C.Emmerson and M.Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World*, translated by H.Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Bakhtin, M. (2002). The Bildungsroman and its significance in the history of realism, In C.Emmerson & M.Holquist (Eds.) M.M. *Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Essays*, translated by V.McGee, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Curtis, D & Carter, M. (2008) *Learning Together with Young Children*. St. Paul MN: Redleaf Press.
- Da Matta., R. (1991). *Carnivals, Rogues and heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian dilemma*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston: DC Heath.
- Down, B. & Hogan, C. (1999). *Critically Reflective practice and Workplace Learning: Impediments and Possibilities in Teacher Education*, AARE archived documents. Retrieved November 5th. From <http://www.aare.edu.au/99pap/hog99095.htm>
- Elliott, S. (1999). *Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin’s Poetics*. IU ScholarWorks Repository. Retrieved November 5th. From ([https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/2022/2327/1/30\(1-2\)+129-139.pdf](https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/2022/2327/1/30(1-2)+129-139.pdf))
- Gee, J.P., Hull, G., & Lankshear, C. (1996). *The new work order: Behind the language of the new capitalism*. St.Leonards;Allen Unwin.
- Grundy, S & Hatton, E. (1998). *Teacher educators, students teachers and biography influences: implications for teacher education*. Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 21(1), (7-24).
- Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner. How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Smyth, J. (1989). Developing and Sustaining Critical Reflection in Teacher Education. *Journal of Teacher Education* March-April, 2-9.
- Stout, C. J. (1989). Teachers’ views of the emphasis on reflective teaching skills during their student teaching, *The Elementary School Journal*, 89 (4), (511-527).