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Pedagogy and positioning theory: relationships and the formation of context

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ABSTRACT

Structures and procedures that govern education provision inextricably generate positions for an articulation of pedagogy. Further, wider social-political and cultural-historical frames offer Discourses (after Gee 2012) that position pedagogy within educational provision. For the last 40 years neoliberalism, in various guises, has provided the backdrop to such provision and visions for, and the operationalisation of, pedagogy. Anglophonic interpretations are limited in their appraisal here through their positioning of pedagogy as 'the methods and practices of teaching', where context is portrayed as a series of matters to be mitigated so that quantitative uplift through learner credentialization can ensue. Alternatively, conceiving of pedagogy as 'being in, and acting on the world, with and for others' marks a shift both in how pedagogic moments are conceptualised and how context fits therein. Using Positioning Theory (cf. Harré and van Langenhove 1999), This paper argues that context cannot be seen as an immutable and fixed matter to which pedagogy must reply. Rather, pedagogy benefits from the realisation that moment-by-moment discursive interactions position and (re)position context in terms of its relationship with and to the worldly approach to pedagogy outlined above. The paper concludes by deploying this idea in the arena of classroom and behaviour management.

Introduction

Educational activity always has context, be this physical, social, cultural, emotional, anthropological, historical, political, and so forth. Across Anglophone countries (and others) such 'context' has come to be orchestrated by versions of neoliberalism and associated educational approaches through agendas such as the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Sahlberg 2012). Although ascendent, many feel that neoliberalism's reach and influence has far exceeded that which should be permitted due to its deleterious effect on national and global stability, fairness, justice, and equality (Giroux 2022).

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Neoliberalism posits a certain positioning of community through its interpretation of context: to meet fiscal uplift while maintaining elite control requires 'Othering' to manage the vagaries and vicissitudes elevated and reduced by neoliberalism itself. It requires individuals to challenge the inevitability of life through the possibility of a better future where wealth, status and power are available to all (Monbiot 2016). What neoliberalism does not do is identify that such possibilities are, mostly, improbable; it obfuscates here-and-now realities by insisting that opportunity exists for those willing and able to seize it. For those for whom such success does not appear, blame can be laid at the door of ineffectual state services, miscreant individuals and groups, and nefarious activist organisations (e.g., the 'anti-growth coalition' highlighted by ex-UK Prime Minister, Liz Truss). Ultimately, neoliberalism posits individual responsibility for personal circumstances as capitalist forces 'liberate' all if only individuals would act accordingly.

That 'the elite' hold more wealth and power than the rest of the population combined requires (re)positioning: hence such groups are marked as the engine room of the economy and central to the health of the nation. Such groups create jobs and prosperity that 'trickle down' into other areas of social and public life, even though members of the top 1% of earners spend much of their wealth insulating themselves from society at large (Piff and Robinson 2016; Rushkoff 2022) while manipulating political and media influencers to entrench their own status, power, and influence (Neate 2022). That social and other 'problems' persist because of the corralling of wealth by the few is uncomfortable because it means governments, at least, might have to answer difficult and searching questions. Better to blame minority groups, such as immigrants, people of colour, the LGBTQI+ community, trades unions, 'lefty council workers', and the 'WOKE Brigade'. Such presentation of sections of society might be aligned with the rise of populist, 'Strongman' leaders (Rachman 2022) but significantly, they are part of the neoliberal script.

Neoliberalism, then, objectifies certain groups for their (non)contribution to the nation-state. Those who oppose or question status and power, those who dare suggest alternatives to meet wider needs are often politically vilified either through alarmist legislation, tight economic and fiscal directives, or populist skits. Worryingly, such moves have infiltrated education at systemic and classroom levels. An unwillingness to even listen to alternatives is now part of the Western educational world and is often tied into populist rhetoric and direct action to ridicule or even silence those who suggest otherwise (Watson 2021).

As a form of fiscal conservatism (Saltman 2018), neoliberalism is associated with tightly framed conservative educational and social ideologies that seek to orient education towards economic endeavours and tightly frame that to be taught, learnt, and assessed. Here, pedagogy becomes defined as the best methods to achieve uplift in student credentialisation, curriculum becomes defined as the best that has ever been known and said, and educational practice focuses on control. Such shifts are not exclusively 'right-wing' for political parties of many hues engage in such activities to off-set failed policy outcomes and extol the virtues of their approach. Calafati et al. (2023) note how this is often the result of disconnect between 'front office' political representation and the 'back office' of societal administration. Rhetoric and argumentation might differ between left and right, and different groups might be cited as the cause for societal malaise, but nonetheless, as the political elite cannot allow themselves to be identified as being at

fault, their subsequent missives suggest: 'the policy is good, but certain people have ensured that it has not fulfilled its laudable ambitions'.

Neoliberalism establishes a social, political, cultural, and economic frame within which to draw conclusions about the contexts in which people live and associated remedies and remedial action. It is an approach that views context as an all-encompassing and extant matter of objective existence and consequence and thus a confounding factor. In one sense, this is the matter of politics: the setting of a vision for society based on ideological function and form. Hence, neoliberalism argues in terms of 'liberal democracy' which ' . . . assumes politics to be a matter of trial and error and regards political systems as pragmatic contrivances of human ingenuity and spontaneity' (Talmon 1968, 1).

In the media-rich 21st century, messaging can coalesce and be digested in a matter of minutes across the globe. Anyone can now offer an opinion to be taken up, resisted, amended, or subverted. While media once provided facts to enable the populace to formulate their own opinions, now media services the latter leaving 'truth' to be held by anyone. This, and the abrupt nature of democratic cycles means that governments and presidents are more concerned with ensuring future electoral success than dealing with matters before them. National and global crises concentrate the political mind, but as soon as the media moves on, so do politicians. This, coupled with the desire to be seen to 'understand the people' leads to the objectification and rationalisation of that which is seen to be vote winning. Such attempts to direct popular view might be a feature of most political regimes, but neoliberalism presents as quintessentially democratic. As such, and often despite the best efforts of 'democratic' political leaders to subvert due process, messaging must tread a fine line between 'fact', 'opinion', and 'truth'.

This paper challenges neoliberal contexts for education. Specifically, it proposes an original way of conceptualising context for pedagogy which contests that homogeneity is a result of general empirical observation. Specifically, I detail that context is relational, realised through discursive and interactional processes at the micro level with implications for pedagogy. In the first act, following a discussion of neoliberal ontology and epistemology, I demonstrate how such thinking has impacted on education, specifically across the Anglophone world. In act 2, I develop thinking about the relationship between neoliberalism, education, and context through the deployment of Positioning Theory. Then, in act 3 I outline a treatise on how the latter can be challenged by an original way of understanding context via moment-by-moment interactional discursive events. Finally, I provide an example by examining classroom and behaviour management approaches for their positioning of context.

Act one: neoliberalism

It is often cited that the origins of neoliberalism stem from the global oil and fiscal crises of the 1970s that led to the monetarist, trickle-down, deregulation policies of Margaret Thatcher's UK Conservative Party and Ronald Regan's US Republican Presidency; this can be challenged, however. First, the architects of neoliberalism began their work as early as 1947, and the realisation/introduction of Keynesian economics (Urry 2016). Members of the Mont Pélerin Society were central in the fightback against Keynesianism state-mandated welfare support. Further, in the 70s and 80s. the 'plight' of those in socialist countries gave succour to those in the West who envisaged a world

dominated by commerce, wealth, and ever-increasing economic growth. The social, economic, and political battles of the 1980s were finally effectively won when the left borrowed the clothes of neoliberalism and when growth returned, and unemployment fell (Duménil and Lévy 2009).

Second, the presentation of neoliberalism as monolithic is now disputed. For Peck and Theodore (2019), it is less a project divorced from locale than a matrix of interdependent and mutually reinforcing, but often contradictory forces, loosely based around historic conceptualisations that mark out wider matters realised through local context. Similarly, Larner (2003) views neoliberalism as a conceptual garbage can; a portmanteau term, albeit one that has, seemingly, usurped globalisation as the defining narrative for governmental aims and practices. Importantly, neoliberalism in its purest form would not probably command much popular democratic support due to the massive shifts required from welfare engaged mechanisms to market-based forces and inherent questions of 'fairness'. In this form, neoliberalism would entail systematic dismantling of most social, political, and community support structures in favour of hyper-individualised mechanisms for awarding benefit, etc. Joronen (2013) is clear: if Classic Liberalism defined homo-economicus as a partner of exchange, then neoliberalism defines homo-economicus in terms of artificially produced competition.

Whether we view neoliberalism as a class-based project or preparation for authoritarianism, centrally, the neoliberal debate is an ontological matter (Knio 2022) which feeds its transformative capacity. Knio's utilisation of structuration theory (not to be confused with Gidden's work) '. . . asserts that structures (and not just agents) generate meaning and is concerned with analysing the non-deterministic (re)production of social structures and their interactions within a social system' (Knio 2022, 4). Path-shaping action is thus enabled or constrained temporally, spatially, agentically, and strategically through selective (mis)recognition within dominant meaning systems. Borrowing from Durkheim (2017), this positions neoliberalism as a totalising matter that shows how actors construct and adhere to social practices because of socialisation within social-political/historical-cultural frames. Although such practices are not necessarily independent of mind, they can be independent of human volition and hence constrain action and activity. Under neoliberalism, social facts are developed which position ontological awareness.

Neoliberalism proposes a deliberate (re)definition of those values perceived as warped (possibly termed a social democratic consensus) seeking instead to re-engineer not only relationships between the poor, the working class, and society, but also the very worth of such groups (Apple 2017). This ontological shift has become an instrument in the drive for economic uplift and profitability for the ultra-rich and powerful. Indeed, in 1957 Polyani noted that the doctrines of Welfarism were being attacked by the political-right as removers of essential freedoms, not only in terms of that permitted but also that deemed possible. Thus, the industry protections and supposed inefficiency of the post-World-War-Two consensus were replaced with minimal worker safeguards to ensure that political, industrial, social, and cultural processes permit a handful of private interests to maximise personal profit (Giroux 2002). Broadly, ontologically speaking, neoliberalism posits that 'markets' be held up as 'sacrosanct' and 'common-sense': it favours individual property rights, the rule of law, personal and individual freedom (Harvey 2005). 'There is no alternative' (TINA) has become the defining ontology by which neoliberal politics operates, providing ' . . . individuals with the background information needed to correctly

interpret what is being said and the brain with the structures necessary to act with intent' (Knio 2022, 5). This neoliberal structure/agency debate while noting how ' . . . ontological differences between contending accounts might be registered' (Hay 2002, 91), seeks to constrain these in the drive for ascendancy. Here, structure/agency is less a problem than a language by which ontological differences between accounts might be registered (Knio 2022).

However neoliberalism is positioned, the literature does not settle on one ontology. There may be some underlying agreementfor example, how neoliberals view democracy suspiciously but tolerate it where there is a strong middle class to ensure political stability through their acquiescence to neoliberal doctrine, but key here is the reliance on such groups to both extol personal wealth acquisition and growth and to vote for politicians who seek to maximise these. At the surface, neoliberalism may position itself ontologically as favouring rule by experts and elites (although how these are defined often demonstrates that such individuals are in fact 'our experts') and judgement by judicial decree rather than democratic and parliamentary decision-making. However, too much democracy here is dangerous for it permits 'the people' opportunities to challenge hegemonic political decisions and thus reduce corporate profit and extend individual agency. The pursuit of such ends might be termed the ontology of Totalitarian Democracy with its assumption of a ' . . . sole and exclusive truth in politics' (Talmon 1968, 1) where political harmony and perfection are seen as alluring and all-embracing drives for human existence to achieve a philosophical organisation that reigns supreme over all fields of life. This ontologically regressive neoliberalism was favoured by Donald Trump and Brexit adherents both of whom were supported by sections of the populous who embraced the reasoning behind neoliberalism in its intent and effects but without the calculating, moral and disciplined reasoning given by the likes of Hayek (Peck and Theodore 2019). Specifically, the freedoms proposed through economic uplift in the 1970s and 1980s have been replaced by a form of neoliberalism that seeks quasi-totalitarian control of state apparatus to continue to embolden those who have at the expense of all others while shifting blame away from disruptive neoliberal elements onto the shoulders of 'the undeserving' or the 'Other'. Neoliberal reality can be said to have emerged as a site for the construction of groups and their relationships with and to each other.

This is neoliberalism's intelligence though: Harvey (2005, 5) notes that in promoting individual freedom as its ontological basis, neoliberalism supports the very fabric of civilisation as we know it. The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as 'the central values of civilization'. In so doing, they chose wisely, for these are indeed compelling and seductive. These values, neoliberals held, were threatened not only by fascism, dictatorships, and communism, but by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgements for those of individuals, free to choose. The centrality of knowledge possession under centrally planned systems misunderstands the place and form of knowledge in society and the economy; what is necessary is a system that specifically operates with fleeting certainty/uncertainty (Krasovec 2013). Although markets are not conscious human endeavours but rather social aspects that have evolved spontaneously and in an unplanned manner as by-products of complex social interactions, they provide for an objective social institution, capable of integrating and coordinating dispersed and imperfect

knowledge (Krasovec 2013). Following Hayek, as we cannot know all there is to know, we must satisfy ourselves with partial knowledge that allows us to remain free through adaptation to prevailing economic circumstances. In the new industrial revolution, commercial services become productive and those who work with their hands become increasingly seen as unproductive. This centrality of epistemological constructions was represented through the shift to mass education. While this was as much about economics as in the pre-knowledge society era, as workers provide for competitive edge through their labour, education had to shift from being the province of the elites to a necessity for all, but only in so far as it ensured that the workforce was attuned to meeting production needs through knowledge work (Krasovec 2013).

As Lynch (2006) notes, what Neoliberalism does offer is a critique of rights-based approaches for it does not wish to guarantee state-based rights in education, welfare, health care and other public goods. Rather, market citizenship (Calafati et al. 2023) orients the consumer as able to make market-based decisions where well-being and knowledge thereof is an individual, not state-based issue (the state is no longer responsible and merely exists to facilitate individual choice and decision-making within a loosely defined and enacted legal system). The individual is required to think only of herself. Neoliberalism locates the person as rational decision-maker and ignores the interdependent nature of human existence, preferring to extol the virtues of economic individualism. It seeks to remove cost from the state passing it instead to the person. From the 1980s, Neoliberalism has been touted as the only way to solve economic and social problems and accordingly, free-market thinking, competitiveness, and deregulation are now de rigour and form much of the driving force behind welfare responses globally.

What can be inferred is a philosophy of political economy that emphasises private property rights and which smooths market functions to provide possible and alluring individual solutions to social and economic problems (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism is more than policy and ideology: ontologically it refers to specific, yet differing constructions of socio-economic-political realities; a specific style or a general mentality of rule that can be understood in terms of what Foucault (1991) referred to as 'governmentality': controlling or guiding the relationship between individuals and their relationships with social institutions and communities (Pick and Taylor 2009, 69–70). Relationally, Neoliberalism and individualism promote life as a project whereby ' … the self is the subject of continuous economic capitalisation' (Pick and Taylor 2009, 78) through the adoption of certain epistemological assumptions about knowledge, work, and worth. The Neoliberal state produces (ontologically) the individual as economic entrepreneur and the institution as the creator of such individuals that, in turn, produces (epistemologically) docile individuals who see themselves as free but who are in fact tightly controlled (Davies and Bansel 2007).

Following the above, it can be noted that I have both argued for a discerning and segmented view of neoliberalism, while at the same type deploying a wide-ranging trope to discuss its impacts and reach. I make the point though, that even following the call for more definitional focus, the rounded discussion I employ situates that to come in terms of context and its relationship with pedagogy for two reasons. First, ontologically defining neoliberalism in terms of fiscal or economic matters alone negates the conjoined impact

that 'neoliberal' forces have had on education broadly and pedagogy specifically. Second, pedagogy itself is not a universally agreed epistemological position, indeed, 'Western' conceptions may narrow its scope whilst Continental or Nordic interpretations might broaden its reach.

Act two: education and neoliberalism

What is particularly noted as a mediator between Neoliberalism and pedagogy is how democratic values have steadily given way to commercial ones over the past 40 or so years. This transformation dismisses social visions as hopelessly out of date to be replaced by the entrepreneur as ascendant (Giroux 2002). Commercialism, privatisation, and deregulation replace civic responses. Subsequently, the individual is defined through the mechanisms of individualism, competition, and consumption (Giroux 2002). The person is held up, not as a social being, but as an individual consumer with attendant rights.

In contrast to 1960s and 1970s professionally led, state-controlled systems, globally, from the neoliberal 1980s, 'objective' evaluation methods for education were introduced driven by the key ontologies of efficiency, effectiveness, performance, and value for money through the deployment of statistical measures to determine whether education was 'improving'. Ontologically, this ' . . . shift towards quantitative knowledge reinforced drives for certainty, for clear priorities and for conceptualising performance in terms of tangible outcome' (Henkel 1991, 134) relates to epistemological forms centred on the primacy of certain knowledge and ways of knowing. As neoliberal nation states were increasingly re-positioned by global business and interconnected global forces, governments wielded decreasing powers internationally but were keen to ensure they were seen as effective at home. The significant shift was towards the self-interested individual as economic subject and patriotic citizen. Significantly, now there is an emphasis on enterprise and a certain disregard for collective responsibility. The 'citizen' is now the 'middle-class consumer' which positions the individual less favourably regarding state intervention with consequent outcomes when poverty and disenfranchisement are seen as personal failings (Harvey 2005).

Central here is the promise of the maximisation of personal opportunity through entrepreneurship, the privatisation of state activities, a reduction in the role for representative government, and increased need to respond to market-based reforms (Bobbitt 2002). In education, privatisation is welcomed and in turn the state becomes responsible for monitoring and controlling 'good behaviour' (Ainley 2004) through the *distribution* of profit, loss, and accountability rather than a *redistribution* of wealth (European Trade Union Institute 2001). Part of this function is the maintenance of decentralised responsibility (education professionals and institutions become responsible for provision) through the contradictory centralisation and exercise of power (mostly through strict monitoring of programmes and activities that service acquisitive functions). Today, a neoliberal *economic* consensus mandates global competitiveness as the driving force for national policymaking through favourable pro-choice governance mechanisms (Kelly 2009). Seemingly, the aim of national governments is to: create the conditions for facilitating innovation and investment; keep wages and taxes low; and develop competitive modes of governance (Kelly 2009). While the state is rolled back, new modes of governance and

regulation ensure that the individual acts in accordance with neoliberal doctrine. In education, the state *passes the ball* (Kelly 2009) to teachers and institutions, so they might solve *problems* that mostly have social, cultural, economic, and political origins, but are judged as individually soluble through 'better education'. This forms a simplistic line where social problems are viewed ontologically as non-representative of 'the real' and where better education is an epistemological endeavour guided by the acquisition of the 'right' knowledge, packaged and commodified.

A notable outcome is the shift to holding to task teachers and institutions as the reason for success/failure judged in economic terms. Education, (schools and teachers) are held to account for fiscal, economic, and business failings. An overly simplistic linearity between educational success (as measured by quantitative uplift) and a successful economy is promoted and educationalists are either lauded for their success in such endeavours or chastised. Schools and individual teachers are the focus for and of control through the conferment of *earned freedoms*: those teachers/schools that 'do well' (mostly judged in terms of student attainment) are 'freed' from the shackles of state control; those deemed otherwise are ruthlessly observed. Indeed, for those schools that do not do well in the neoliberal frame, further marketisation activities become the norm through programmes such as charter and/or free schools, and academy status and other control measures such as inspection, a rigid, knowledge-based focus for curriculum statements (whether National or otherwise), official statements about pedagogy, and Initial Teacher Training (ITT) reminiscent of 19th century ideas of the Apprentice Teacher. If the state is required to take a firsthand approach, it is remedial in function; a problem-solving mechanism enacted in response to emergency. Once this emergency has passed the state retreats and leaves the market to allocate and distribute resources, something it can do much better than any bureaucracy (Bonal 2003). Although this may appear to confer agency, in effect the tight mandates exercised centrally engender the opposite: rigidly controlled schools and professionals who judge their work in relation to that which is politically required and that which is perceived to be happening elsewhere, rather than that which is pedagogically or educationally justifiable.

One question here is the place for context as a defining feature of education and pedagogy. The neoliberal, market-based turn certainly understands context, but through a lens where it provides for 'confounding variables' to be moderated/considered/factored in. In the drive to uplift *quantitative* measures, context becomes reduced to manageable, limiting features. Ontologically and epistemologically, here context provides diagnostic and productive functions to meet tightly defined and limiting outputs. Schools work 'in contexts' whose limiting functions require mediation and remedy, while 'providing a context' whose entrepreneurial aspects should be elevated. The tautology here is that such context concerns (un)freedom, that is, freedom to undertake that which 'the centre' requires, realised and enacted locally, agreed and signed off by centralised officialdom. Here, historical tropes are deployed, such as improving the education of those 'disadvantaged' in ways that position local context as a causal factor from which children and young people 'need saving'. The former ceases to be something to work *with*, and instead becomes something to be *replaced*: 'school' as 'oasis'. Such messianic zeal is misplaced in that it strips away social, cultural, economic, and historical matters and replaces them with an officially sanitised version of that which *is* and that which *should be*. Cultural forms such as hairstyles, linguistic codes and verbal/non-verbal communication become heavily

policed with serious ramifications for those who transgress. The individual child/young person is surveilled by school staff for compliance and schools are similarly overseen by the centre.

It might be argued that schools have always reinforced dress-codes, etc. and that moves in this regard are simply a return to 'good discipline'. This might have some argumentative laudability: throughout the Welfare era schools operated 'in local context' to meet 'local need' as defined by wide-ranging and broadly understood realisation. There may have been a surveillance structure, but today this is taken to extremes. Local culture, society, etc. are now viewed as 'problematic' and in need of modification so that children and young people can understand their worth as marketplace individuals. The shift has been from conformity in a civic, social, and cultural sense to conformity as an economic determiner.

Act three: positioning theory, pedagogy, and context

In 2011, Adams described two positions for pedagogy: *ritual* and *mindfulness*. The first detailed stifled and formulaic responses to pedagogic moments, the latter a fluid and holistic interpretation of pedagogy that locates its ontology within the relational. Adams' work posits ' . . . how practice both "represents" and "produces" seemingly fixed and yet often contradictory representations of professional pedagogic beliefs' (Adams 2011, 58). This pedagogic perspective confers agency, but agency determined as the ' . . . subject's exercise of choice from the discourses available. In short, through the act of locating oneself within a frame of pre-determined potentialities, the subject is said to exercise agentic action' (Adams 2011).

There is a need to consider how context might be alternatively deployed. What is required is a way to understand how the 'ought' in a situation comes to the fore, and how this fits with describing action and acts. Deploying the work of writers such as Rom Harré, Adams (2016) applies Positioning Theory (cf. Harré and van Langenhove 1999) to the field of education policy. Rejecting 'role' as a too-static social typification (after Luberda 2000), Positioning Theory develops the 'more dynamic metaphor of "position"' (Luberda 2000, 3). Pedagogically, this recognises that while the role-term 'teacher' suffices as linguistic shorthand, to capture accurately someone who finds themselves so described requires a more dynamic language. By adopting a vibrant moment-by-moment illumination of pedagogical work, Positioning Theory notes teaching's ' . . . inextricable connection to the immediacy of context and the history of experience' (Adams 2011, 61). Positioning Theory specifically adopts the ontology that all social acts occur at some time and in some location but that the psychological and the social do not neatly map onto the physical (van Langenhove and Harré 1999): the former two are not only subject to (mis)remembering and (mis)interpretation through time but are also subject to variations in (mis) remembering and (mis)interpretation *in-the-moment*.

Further, Positioning Theory allows for an expanding locus from individual interactions to the workings of nation states (Harré et al. 2009). It offers a way to analyse intricate context-relationships ontologically and epistemologically. Epistemologically, *being-in-the-moment* is ephemeral and accordingly, self-presentation is not static and pre-ordained. Positioning Theory highlights the competition inherent between *performed* epistemologies as orientations towards the *use of knowledge*. It highlights

those preservation strategies designed to maintain the status quo, thereby opening possibilities. Although not writing from a Positioning Theory perspective, Saltman (2018, 5) notes,

> Through dialogue and the exchange of meanings between teachers and students, the subjective experiences of both can be understood as produced by broader objective conditions. Moreover, through dialogue, subjective experiences and particular contexts can be interpreted as a means of shaping and transforming the objective social conditions and future experiences.

Further, Positioning Theory specifically deploys a non-static representation of persona. Rather than this being positively correlated between thought, action/speech, and act, it challenges the view that how one acts is broadly the same in whatever situation one finds oneself. To achieve this, Positioning Theory demonstrates how epistemologies of storylines and language offer positions for individuals to take-up, resist, amend, or subvert thus foregrounding context.

Above Saltman discussed 'objective reality'. Positioning Theory, whilst dismissing the ontology of an overall objective truth to social interaction, does acknowledge that how context is experienced epistemologically can appear objective. However, this is not context as static representation, for Positioning Theory would deny context described as, for example, a monolithic representation of local community. Rather, it notes that individuals therein each 'know' this locale (possibly significantly) differently, and that such knowing shifts and morphs *in* chronological time due to individuals' existence *through* time. Past, present, and future offer storylines and languages to be deployed to socially interact not as individual and distinct instances of (mis)remembering, but as language, storyline and position brought to bear in the moment by engagement through (mis) remembered possibilities and potentialities. Storylines here are identified as ' ... the narrative structures used to organize and give meaning to a sequence of past and/or projected future events that are conceived as an episode' (Slocum-Bradley 2009, 83). This tri-partite heuristic (position, language, storyline) implicitly imports temporality (the human perception and social organisation of time) as a socially constructed ontology (Harré and van Langenhove 1999) wherein individual epistemic positions are ever-changing and possibly fleeting.

Through the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Sahlberg 2012), neoliberalism offers alluring connections between educational provision, teaching, learning, and national success. Operationalised through systemic organisational features designed to 'release potential', some countries have dismantled locally organised schooling in favour of choice mechanisms such as pro-market-free schools or voucher systems. In some instances, associated teaching approaches have contracted in scope and reach through the adoption of reductive features that reduce professional and learner agency. Such GERM-oriented approaches promote pedagogy as a series of linear interactions designed to ensure 'successful learning' as indicated by quantitative uplift in national and international tests and compliant 'learning-oriented' behaviours. Such approaches contrast with understandings and beliefs such as those signalled by Gough (2012, 46) who cautions against ' ... complying with models and trends in education that assume linear thinking, control and predictability'. In effect, GERM repurposes pedagogy from the political and intergenerational to the individual and intragenerational (Ketschau 2015); it posits that

responsibility for educational 'success' is achieved by collusion between accountable teachers and conscientious learners. Here, teaching becomes synonymous with pedagogy as the best way/the only appropriate way to ensure maximum learning with a focus on 'what works' (Claxton 2021) or 'best practice' (Adams 2008; Claxton 2021). Here, pedagogy is often identified as precise forms of technically legitimate teaching competence, massified and corporatised to meet the ends of individual consumer competition.

Conversely, others promote pedagogic orientations which attempt to understand the context of educational inputs/outcomes and their application/realisation through wide-ranging teaching/evaluation constructs. Whereas GERM holds that (often scientific) canons offer digestible vignettes (Gough 2012), such alternatives make a case for pedagogic underpinning to be rooted in complexity. Notably, this debate reflects centuries-old traditions: the contest between 'teacher-focused' and 'child-centeredness' or 'traditional' and 'progressive'.

Many neoliberal educational systems and procedures might extol individual success, but are, singularly, designed for future gainful employment. Hence, educational intervention now seeks the mitigation of structural inequalities; improvements in teaching quality and learner attainment are proffered as responsibilised terms designed to reduce failure (Steadman and Ellis 2021) through the 'fact' that they confer equality. Each child is seen to have their right to a quality education to take their (economically) productive place in society. The hold of such mono-interpretive views has gained considerable ground across the Anglophone world. Unfortunately, GERM-determined, narrow conceptions of pedagogy elide intent and purpose and assume instead that the aim of education is to support students to attain qualifications to gain traction in the corporatised and marketised world.

Adams (2022) discusses this Anglophonic position and notes that pedagogy is here seen as the methods and practices of teaching. While this suggests approaches significant for educational operationalisation, this definition runs aground when considered in terms of which methods that might extol. For Bell (2003) methods can be delineated as: a smorgasbord of ideas; a prescription for practice; or an umbrella term of approach, design, and procedure. Consideration of the first two highlights that they may either too readily accept seemingly related assertions, such as locating classroom practice according to learning styles, or they may too readily restrict professional agency through the conferment of (un)acceptability as defined by political and social positions. As Adams (2022, 9) notes, this approach positions

> ... teaching as 'means directed', effectively denying agentic governance beyond anything but that focused on the elicitation of outcomes through pre-ordained and specific professional input.

However, pedagogy does not and should not have one operationalisation; rather, pedagogic forms point in myriad directions depending on who is speaking/writing, for whom and why. For Gough (2012, 46) understanding pedagogy in complex terms, ' ... invites us to understand our physical and social worlds as open, recursive, organic, nonlinear and emergent ... '; essentially, pedagogy asks us to examine the Big-D and little-d/D/discourses (after Gee 2012) of teaching and how these involve distinguishing actively and/or reflectively what is good, right, life enhancing, just, and supportive from what is not good, wrong, unjust, or damaging to the ways we act, live, and deal with others (van Manen 2015, 19–20, as cited in Klitmøller 2018). To ascribe 'truth' to one pedagogic approach

denies human existence: what works in one situation may well not work in another. The challenge is '...to distinguish between what is known in a scientific sense of being explicit, cumulative and generalisable, and what are the irreducibly intuitive and creative elements of teaching' (Pollard 2010, 5) within which the professional exercises their professionality and professionalism. As Alexander (2008, 47) notes, pedagogy is a [D]iscourse that '... informs and justifies the act of teaching and the learning towards that teaching is directed...'. Pedagogy is not just about disembodied technique; it '... reflects and manifests values. In turn these are not merely the personal predilections of individual teachers, but the shared and/or disputed values of the wider culture' (Alexander 2008, 19).

For pedagogy to be meaningful it must extend beyond the individual classroom to represent '... something greater than a more effective approach to teaching' (Leach and Moon 2008, 3). Day-to-day actions and activities of the classroom/micro teaching-contexts sit within wider institutional and national/international Discourses. In turn, to enable consideration of the language of pedagogy is constructive of, and resultant from, those D/discourses that seek to orientate pedagogy through the way they articulate a need to consider the social, cultural, and political for their impact on pedagogical 'moments'.

Best (1988) goes further and suggests that to ignore this devalues and deflects pedagogy from its original meaning. Pedagogy must consider its position in relation to wider social, political, and cultural forces manifest in pronouncements and policies, evident in the ways in which Discourses that seemingly do not directly impact on teaching, offer positions for professional acceptance or rejection. Such positions, implicit or explicit, are the substance of pedagogical acts. The need is to account for pedagogic practice as integrating large-scale, macro factors with micro-levels of analysis (Daniels 2001).

A well-known heuristic here is the pedagogical triangle which illuminates the relationship between content, teacher, student, and pedagogical *intent*. In GERM-inspired approaches, intent focuses on reducing the gap between student and content [Figure 1] in the belief that the knowledge to be learnt is epistemologically agreed and
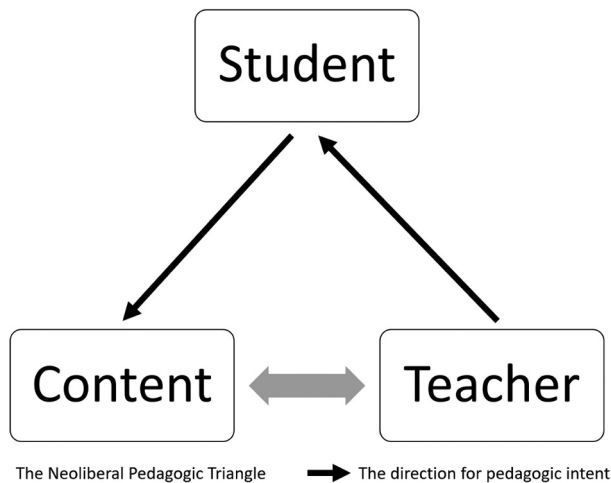

The Neoliberal Pedagogic Triangle ➡ The direction for pedagogic intent

Figure 1. The neoliberal pedagogic triangle → the direction for pedagogic intent.
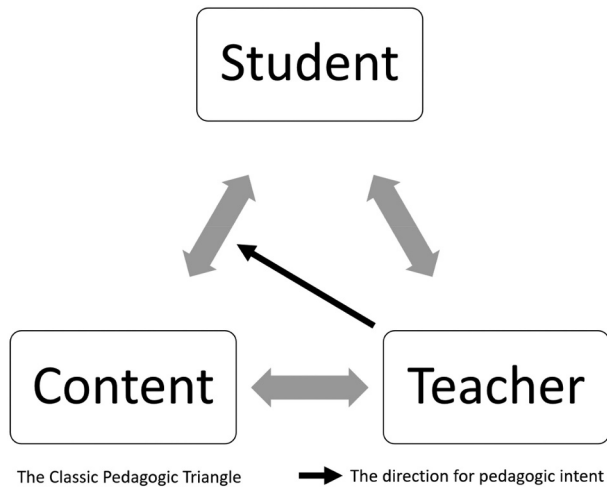
Figure 2. The classic pedagogic triangle → the direction for pedagogic intent.

intersubjectively incontestable. The teacher influences the student, who in turn 'comes to know'. The starting point is epistemological, not relational; the approach seeks to engender epistemological certainty as defined by agreed definitions and interpretations rather than epistemological critique.

This approach can be contrasted by pedagogic intent which animates the learner–content relationship, and which explicitly notes how different individuals come to know and be able do [Figure 2]. Here, the teacher's pedagogical intent seeks to influence the *relationship* learners have with content; an implicit acceptance and tacit acknowledgement that how we come to know is individual, set within social, cultural, political, etc. frames of reference. Pedagogical intent is thus posited as the influence of a teacher on the relationship learners have with the aspect of the world under review.

There is, though, a further orientation, one which acknowledges that pedagogical intent always stems from relationships between teacher, student, and (aspects of) the world. Pedagogy is animated, not by the teacher redirecting/reorienting/noting the relationship between student and the world, but by relationships the teacher has with the student and the world, and relationships the student has with the teacher and the world. This is a relational-relationship. Adams (2022) posits, then, that pedagogy is: 'being in, and acting on the world, with and for others'; the relational implicitly situates the individual not in terms of epistemes to be understood and accepted, but within positions that can be supported and/or challenged as mediations between extant ways of knowing and being [Figure 3].

Two points require elaboration. First, 'the world' is neither statically understood nor statically represented. How one 'is' and 'wishes to be' in the world is neither monolithic in intent nor in presentation. Social interactions may start with perceived dialogic/interactional goals but to assume these remain consistent presents relations as inflexible, pre-ordained, constrained, and linear for this assumes that both (or all) parties therein pre-decide the starting point, end point, and direction for debate. Invariably, though,
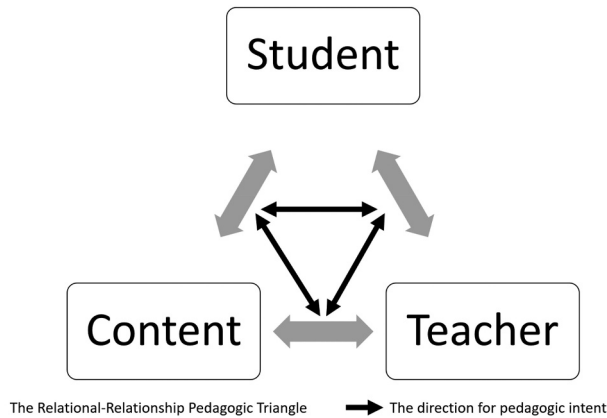
The Relational-Relationship Pedagogic Triangle   ➡ The direction for pedagogic intent

Figure 3. The relational-relationship pedagogic triangle → the direction for pedagogic intent.

individuals do not enter pedagogic moments as a single persona. As Harré and van Langenhove note:

> The same individual … can manifest any one of their repertoire of personas in clusters of behaviour displayed in the appropriate social context. Taken over a period of time it becomes clear that each person has many personas, any one of which can be dominant in one's mode of self-presentation in a particular context. (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, 7)

Such a position does not align well with neoliberal, GERM-framing of educational systems and pedagogic intent for these ignore the vagaries of contextual matters and speak to ritual as the defining feature. This may facilitate unsophisticated political messaging and options for representation of 'the real' as linear and simplistically representational, but *general solutions* then ensue which may seemingly provide comfort, but which often do not meet need. Second, pedagogy as 'being in and acting on the world with and for others' specifically notes the discursive for its lifeblood. This requires presence *between* teacher *with and for* the other that attends to all *within this moment* and *through moments*. Such presence is both towards and reflective of context: towards because it positions moments *through* storyline, position, and language; reflective because it positions these *in* moments.

The temporality of shifting identities noted in the idea of positioning, the deployment of language forms (verbal, non-verbal, etc.), along with the intersection of varying story-lines requires an appreciation of pedagogical context (un)bound by history, geography, economics, etc. While these latter Discourses provide a frame for the discursive, orienting pedagogy through position, storyline, and language are implicitly connected to the ongoing (re)framing of context. And while all are positioned through legislation, policy and political frames and explanations, and economic-legalistic perspectives, taking these alone as backdrop locates pedagogic context as neither interpersonal nor flexible. In short, here pedagogy ceases to be referential and becomes directional; it overtly aligns the descriptive through its normative position.

Those positions offered and subsequently taken-up, resisted, amended, or sub-verted provide for moment-by-moment pedagogic interactions. They signal that the discursive is not simply call-and-respose but is in effect disputational/negotiated.

Similarly, the storylines brought to bear in/through moment(s) require an apprecia-
tion of how storyline is (re)/(re)presented through the language brought to bear
across little-d/discourse. Through the to-and-fro, the cut-and-thrust of human–
human interaction, Positioning Theory pedagogy locates context and contextual
relationships.

It may seem obvious to extol the virtues of such context as non-linear, relational, and
discursive, but it is not clear that neoliberal education politics recognises this. The
formulation of educational systems and pedagogy through the neoliberal frame suggests
the need for acceptance of message and mission, the operationalisation of which requires
containment of political-educational Discourses and professional discourses, curtailment
of professional and student action and response, and control of wider media narratives.
Since the 1980s, these aspects have been driven by wide-ranging calls for specific and
linear relationships between success at school (judged in narrow terms) and economic
success. Across many Western democracies such as the UK (and from 1999 devolved
administrations across the four jurisdictions), Australia and New Zealand, these presented
as curriculum narrowing, teaching/learning directives, and the introduction of methods
such as distributed leadership which purport to confer agency for change, but which in
effect shift responsibility for failure downstream, away from management and leadership.
While these were hailed as defining moments for local democracy and contextual
responses to educational matters, in effect what occurred was the down-stream objecti-
fication of political-economic drives to ensure that education, broadly conceived, met
economic and political market-based ends. To survive educationally meant the accep-
tance of such messages and the operationalisation of mandated, day-to-day pedagogic
moments.

Such descriptive constructs for education were presented as incontestable whilst
normative assertions were lauded solely for their narrowly defined success. Alexander
(2004) bemoaned a lack of pedagogy, as an expression of values for teaching and
education, in New Labour's then policy drive 'Excellence and Enjoyment' (Department
for Education and Skills 2003), while (Hartley 2006) observed of the same policy docu-
ment, the objectification of 'excellence' was that as conferred by the market, and 'enjoy-
ment' was as realised through individual purchasing power. As a potential counter to this
narrative, governments such as the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition in Scotland
between 1999 and 2007 were described as behaving differently. Observations of the
Scottish 'Curriculum for Excellence', proposed from 2004 but mandatory from 2010 for
example noted a shift away from commodifiable knowledge assessed solely through
highly surveilled exams. However, there are those who counter that while such shifts
did occur, ultimately the neoliberal mandate was still in the ascendency North of the
Border (Paterson 2003) something supported in recent policy suggestions (Muir 2022).

The interaction between position, storyline, and language posited by Positioning
Theory marks both a way to observe such political dynamics and a way to shift emphasis
onto the relational in the definition of context. While each provides perspective, alone
each does not necessarily challenge wider discourses. It might also be argued that when
taken together, the triad provides a means to observe interaction but does not necessarily
provide impetus for change. Key here is the observation of Positioning Theory as
a mechanism for context in the round: that is, context observed as more than elevated
P/political messaging; instead, context as *shifting relational and interactional moments*.

Three further points emerge. First, the conjoining of position, storyline, and language obviates the potential segmentary nature of Positioning Theory. Rather than each element having relations with and to the others, locating context as realised in the overlaps between all three shifts attention towards explicit and implicit ways by which stances, biographies, and communication are all vital in understanding how context is imbued with meaning, debated, and operationalised as a moment-by-moment relational matter. Second, the adoption of this conjoining elevates discussions about why context is seen *as it is (here)*, why such beliefs *arise*, why these often have a *transitory ontology*, and how such ephemera can, epistemologically, become elevated to *the real*. These two points raise the spectre of context as caught between moment-by-moment operationalisation and mandated meta-narratives that seek to drive institutional mechanisms. However, what I argue here is that by observing the intersecting aspects of position, storyline, and language, context ceases to be something that exists independently of the knower/s, and instead becomes that brought into existence through discursive moments.

Finally, this conjoining relates specifically to pedagogy: alignment with relationships between the plurality of worlds people inhabit, worlds that coalesce, struggle, contest, and (re)affirm. This conjoining requires ontological appreciation of contexts as *positioned worlds*: an acceptance of the epistemologically ungiven nature of discourse, even within the given Discourse of neoliberalism. Pedagogically, this orients teacher-action towards difference, not to obviate society or community but rather to develop professional responses that seek intersectional-relational moments through which dialogue, change, and agency might develop. Rather than context as ontologically pre-existing pedagogy, pedagogy in this vein is the very 'stuff' of context through the necessity for professionals to be in and act on the world/s both with and for others. Context thus offers position, storyline, and language, but is not constrained by these as the interactional moment renders them anew.

An example: professional control for student behaviour

A notable feature of Anglocentric education concerns the maintenance and control of the behaviour of children and young people across state-sponsored education systems. Following the above are two aspects to consider. The first pertains to how state sponsored systems increasingly attempt to hijack the day-to-day work of professionals in pedagogic interactions through specific guidance and, if deemed necessary, directive. Such hijacking occurs overtly through policy: the setting in train of discussions, exhortations, legislation, and mandate to direct towards the ends for specific professional activity. In step with linear, technicist-rationalist interpretations of policy, political figures are wedded to the belief that such 'readerly' policy explanations (Adams 2016) are necessary in the drive to uplift educational outcomes when in fact such missives cannot be relied upon to either capture accurately the intent behind policy explanations or fully impact professional activity. Such approaches are in fact more akin to the maintenance of ideological opinion than the improvement of education for all. Repeatedly, policymakers (if such a group exists or has ever existed) are mostly focussed on reorienting state education to mirror that which they perceive will generate increased opportunities and returns for certain societal groups. That governments rarely, if ever, legislate or mandate for fee-paying

schools bears testament to this: after all, members of such institutions are seen to offer the greatest uplift economically.

Second, it is important to realise that in the main, political control is exercised through a variety of circulating Discourses that generate increased traction between educational improvements and economic growth. Such Discourses are often seemingly tangentially related to education, through for example, statements concerning crime. More direct though, are arguments that specifically align education systems with future societal visions, part of which is the maintenance and replicability of 'good pupil behaviour'. There is an assumed simple causal line that underscores neoliberal tendencies: educational uplift is economically necessary; good behaviour of a certain, identifiable, objective type contributes to this outcome; such behaviour needs to be maintained for educational and societal cohesion; and teachers are at the forefront of such drives. Professional activity is thus drawn not to the maintenance of relationships with(in) fluid and locally negotiated context, but rather to the provision of officially mandated, sanctioned, and observed teacher–pupil relationships stemming from inflexible and universally mandated contexts.

This manifests in one (or both) of two ways. The first is the adoption of a 'no excuses' approach. Such a position rests on two things. First, the absolute authority of school-based staff to define acceptable teacher-student actions. Here, context may become positioned as an unacceptable matter out-there to which is paid no concern, a limiting matter described only through the ways in which it positions students as victims or representatives of contextual factors that should be obviated. Thus, arguments are given such as 'the pupils in this school have no order at home; we supply this'. The point here is that such order is of a specific type: the adoption of ways of being that conform to neoliberal drives to attain a good education and thus appropriately (*viz* economically) contribute to society. Such institutions may not applaud those who go into activism or community work, or who do not attend tertiary education, but they do acclaim those who enter a profession, or who attend a 'good university'. The focus here is not the establishment of behaviour conducive to being in the world with and for others, but rather the formation of actions and acts that mirror the language and positions of elites. Recent behaviour by UK ministers of state and members of the UK parliament attests to the point that such education, particularly when wedded to a sense of entitlement, does not always provide for ethical or moral action.

The second manifestation concerns how context is considered with ensuing flexible approaches albeit within a frame that seeks to obviate temporality and individuality (these students 'had' or 'have' a difficult life situation) ameliorated through directive and directed pedagogy viewed as the 'methods and practices of teaching'. What is probably better called specific-didactics is thus elevated as the defining aspect of teacher–pupil interaction through a *saviour* approach for professional activity. The focus here is on professional expertise to positively direct student behaviour in lieu of supportive home/community contexts.

Adherents to either view often present such mechanisms as required in the drive to better direct children and young people away from problematic contexts towards those of a more wholesome hue. This assumes a given ontology, one to which all can and must attend. Arguments then abound that 'sweating the small stuff' possibly within a context of limited/no excuses reduces the likelihood of significant 'difficult' behaviour. Epistemologically, knowledge is of a certain form, one divorced from the relational as

a defining feature and instead understood as a fixed and immutable 'fact of life'. Schools may point to the successes they have with such regimes and how children and young people feel safe and secure.

Such somewhat inflexible and static representations of context may seemingly lead to order, but it is questionable as to whether they accurately and meaningfully develop collaborative, interactional, and flexible insights by either teachers or students. Effectively, the here-and-now is connected to context through the latter's *objective* ontology and importation of knowledge thereof into the pedagogic moment. Put simply, this context *is* and thus requires *this* solution.

Positioning Theory offers an alternative. Through an examination of interactions between the positions offered/taken-up/resisted/amended/subverted, the language used, and the storylines brought to bear in-situ, social interactions can be thought of as responses intimately connected to context(ual) exigencies that not only form the interactional moment in hand but also the very context surrounding the same. Context is thus (re)/(re)positioned through the here-and-now; its realisation in the moment is not static but rather fleeting and (re)/(re)negotiated. The immediate context thus shifts through discursive moments. More than this however, wider context-(ual) matters, often defined as static and externally objective impositions requiring attention are (re)/(re)cast as holding relevant form in the here-and-now only through little-d/discourse. Contexts, both the immediate and discursive and that seemingly 'out there' and 'predefined', shift and morph. Pedagogy is, then, not relationships between people in static contexts realised through static roles, but is, rather, embedded in relational intersections of worlds.

Concluding thoughts

The argument presented above may well be criticised for failing to accommodate the fact that myriad educational professionals are more than aware of how here-and-now contexts construct here-and-now conversations and that professional acts mindfully operate thus. Similarly, it can be argued that for many, pedagogy is not simply a matter of applying previously thought through responses devoid of context, immediate or otherwise. Indeed, professional challenges to labelling theory and self-fulfilling prophecies note the flexibility and lithe ways by which pedagogy occurs through challenges to that seen as oppressive or challenging as well as acknowledgement of wider contexts that sustain student success through elevated social, cultural, political, and economic standing. Unfortunately, even though such understanding might well ensue, it is the case that stark neoliberal ideology, mandate, and associated acts filter local responses through their adherence to monopolistic and uni-directional intent for pedagogy. Often, tight contextual control is sought within the institution to obviate or negate 'unacceptable' or 'inappropriate' contexts outside school. While subjective student experience might well be accepted, 'ritualistic' (after Adams 2011) responses seek to objectify context to maintain professional and institutional control and seek to position school-leavers within existing social-political, cultural-historical frames. A 'mindful' (after Adams 2011) pedagogic context challenges; it seeks not to 'manage' docile educational bodies but rather produce political persons able to both understand and act in the world with and for others.

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