Taking Myths Seriously. Towards Mythologies Of Education

Fred Dervin

> "At bottom, the intellectual, in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodation confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do."
> Edward Said (1996: 23)

The idea of *myths*, but also of acolytes such as *imaginaries* and even *hoaxes*, has been central in my work (Auger, Dervin & Suomela-Salmi, 2009; Dervin, 2012). Many myths from the field of education are reflected in the titles of my books and articles: *the myth of the native speaker*, *myths around the notion of the 'intercultural'*, *myths about study abroad* and *myths about Finnish education*, among others.

About the latter, I have spent the last two years gathering myths about this 'miraculous' system of education both in Finland and around the world. Thanks to the OECD PISA studies, Finnish education has been admired by many researchers, policy-makers and practitioners worldwide – often uncritically. We live in difficult times and it seems to me that many of these individuals are trying to find a 'dream-place', a little paradise, often urged to do so by supra-national institutions like the European Union, probably one of the most active creator of myths in the world today. Finnish neoliberal universities have profited from the country being in the spotlight for 'selling' its education around the world. Unfortunately many myths about Finland have been created by both Finns and foreign visitors: *Finnish kids are more autonomous than others, they are the happiest in the world, teachers are trusted and respected in Finnish society*, etc. These assertions often lead to comparing different systems of education, countries and cultures and even groups of people… "under apparent neutrality of description" (Holliday, 2010: 4) but 'stinking' of ethnocentrism and neo-racism.

Let me give an example to illustrate. One of the proponents of Finnish education, Pasi Sahlberg, who was recently appointed Visiting Professor at Harvard University, is a very active Twitter user. In an exchange that he had with one of his followers, the phenomenon described above appears clearly. First his interlocutor asks him to recommend a book about Finland's education. Naturally he suggests buying his own book entitled *Finnish Lessons*. Then the two thank each other. The final turn in the Twitter discussion is a comment by Sahlberg's follower which reads as follows: "I read a book about the Chinese Ed system and it is fascinating that they just memorize everything. No creative thought". Sahlberg did not comment on this last ethnocentric, ideological and patronizing comment… which is being rehearsed in many fields of knowledge.

Having worked in Finland for 20 years, I believe that these comments could also apply to certain practices in the Nordic country. For example, when I taught languages in secondary education, my pupils insisted on learning sentences by heart and to have vocabulary tests every single week…

I feel that it is urgent to confront such commonsensical myths which are not 'innocent' as they tend to create hierarchies between people, make them lose their agency, 'biologize' negative difference and contribute to injustice (one of the keywords in education research today). This is why I agree with Said's views on the intellectual in the opening quote: as researchers and practitioners we ought to move beyond "easy formulas" and "ready-made clichés". I also agree with Haag and Lemieux (2012) who have suggested that research should consist in thinking otherwise, showing errors, provoking public debates and clarifying one's actions. In relation to the 'Finnish miracle of education', these rarely occur…

On the contrary, the book that the reader holds in her hands does exactly all of that at the same time. It represents one of best volume on myths in education that I have come across. I have to admit that I am very envious of the editors: I wish I had co-edited such a great addition to the field. As I read through the chapters, I felt relieved that many other scholars from different parts of the world shared my views on many and varied 'hot' topics in education. I was also comforted in my opinion that researchers are also mythmakers… and that our role is to problematize and

deconstruct the process of myth creation. The entire volume calls for a research agenda, which is needed more than ever.

What the editors and the authors propose corresponds to what I would like to call *Mythologies of Education*, in reference to a book by Roland Barthes, published in 1957. In this collection of essays Barthes examines myths of bourgeois culture and dissects their functioning in everyday practices. Barthes (ibid.) shows how myths naturalize certain norms and prevent people from being reflective about them. In other words myths can easily become ideologies. Some of his analyses resonate with many arguments made by the volume authors: For Barthes (ibid.) certain myths remove history thus giving the impression that something simply exists and does not need to be questioned; myths allow the mere statement of fact to emerge and thus a certain idea of unquestionable Truth. Based on these two examples, one can easily see how dangerous myths can be for education.

Now let us examine how the Mythologies of Education are enacted in the volume. The editors, Marcus K. Harmes, Henk Huijser and Patrick Alan Danaher, justify rightly the need for such a volume by explaining that "Given this diversity of myths concerning contemporary education, it is timely to interrogate a selection of them, with a view to elucidating their origins and composition, their effects and implications, and appropriate ways of engaging with them". Some chapters deconstruct, challenge but also – and that is very important – propose alternative ways of thinking, doing and researching. Interestingly some chapters consider myths to be "very powerful and productive", especially in didactical terms. This is, I believe, another stimulating vista for future research.

The list of topics (read myths) covered in the volume corresponds to a very up-to-date 'carnival' of myths. The volume opens with myths about teaching and learning: Learner-centredness vs. teacher-centredness (Julianne Willis, Marilynn Willis and Henk Huijser); Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Barbara Harmes); Curriculum on paper vs. the observed teaching practice and implementation of staff (Wim Gijselaers and Amber Dailey-Hebert). The reader will no doubt recognize these 'old' but still topical myths, which need to be revisited again and again.

I found the second part of the volume to be so exciting that I could not put the volume down. It deals with the much-hyped context of digital and online education. In all the countries I have visited recently everyone seems obsessed with jumping on the digital bandwagon. In my own department for example we have been urged to create Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). I remember asking the person who made this suggestion what MOOCs were – he had no idea but said "Americans are producing many!"…

The authors of this section cover the following myths in relation to digital and online education: The rhetoric that surrounds digital literacy (Lorelle Burton, Jane Summers, Jill Lawrence, Karen Noble, and Peter Gibbings); Social, organisational, instructional and technological myths (Elena Barbera Gregori); Myths about online education (Federico Borges and Anna Forés).

Two 'sub-myths' that appear in many chapters are, in my opinion, essential. The first myth concerns the idea of 'Digital natives' (as opposed to 'Digital migrants'). I was born in 1974 and owned my first computer at the end of the 1980s – in 1977 my family already had a Commodore PET. Does this make me an immigrant when I have owned a computer nearly my whole life? Using such labels in research and practice can give the impression of newness and innovation (yet another mythical term). As such the Academy of Finland is currently sponsoring a project under the label *New visions of learning and teaching* which centres on "Digital Natives". When one reads the description of the project, the term is not questioned but basically accepted as 'true': "(the researchers) are currently studying the development of the mind and brain of a generation they call "digital natives". These are the young people who were born and who have grown up surrounded by new technology and communications. (The research leader) says that a gap is now opening up between earlier generations and the children and young people of the digital age." If we go back to Said (ibid.), is this the work of "someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodation confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do"? Another important 'sub-myth' that appears in the chapter repetitively relates to "the idea that the internet is a panacea for the issues of increasing costs of higher education and increasing demand by students for authentic

and interactive learning opportunities" (Lorelle J. Burton, Jane Summers, Jill Lawrence, Karen Noble and Peter Gibbings).

The authors also suggest many ways out of myths in education. Barbara A. H. Harmes confirms my previous comment on Mythologies when she asserts "It is only by understanding these myths – and by interrogating the research relating to them – that positive action can be taken to address them". In a similar vein, Adriana Ornellas and Juana Sancho explain "Deconstructing mythical thinking, in this case about the use of digital ICT in education, seems fundamental to promote critical thinking, construct sound knowledge and prevent ignorance-based mistakes". For Federico Borges and Anna Forés "myths as pockets of belief or understanding (that) require clarification, adjustment or revision". The two scholars also propose a model for analysing myths which is intriguing and deserves exploring. They propose to categorize myths into 'out-dated' myths, 'over-optimistic' myths, 'drawback' myths, and 'confronted' myths (where there are two sides to the same myth, an overstatement and an understatement). These are just examples of ways of examining myths, all the other chapters represent a minefield which will no doubt lead to more research on myths in education.

To conclude I would like to insist on the fact that research and practice need to be more political and less politically correct today. Deconstructing myths – thus 'attacking' truths and beliefs – can be painful for both the listener and the utterer. However this is more and more necessary. Through my work on myths, I have gained admirers but also enemies both in the academia and amongst practitioners. At a conference in Italy in 2013, where I was speaking to 'specialists' of intercultural communication, a few members of the audience reacted aggressively to my deconstruction of myths about the 'intercultural' in research – attacking big but contested figures such as M. Bennett and D. Deardorff whom the audience seemed to worship… Myths do not come out of nowhere but are very much related to the position of God-like figures, who often appear to be untouchable. 'Myth busting' might be uncomfortable but it is a rewarding position which "(…) make one the richer for it, even though it doesn't make one particularly popular" (Said, 1996: 23). Research on education is full of myths that still require our attention. My next targets are already decided (in order of irritation): overreliance on Bourdieu, the idea of

social justice, and the concept of communities of practice. Like this volume, let's now take myths seriously…

References

Auger, N., Dervin, F. & Suomela-Salmi, E. (Eds.)(2009). *Pour une didactique des imaginaires*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. London: Vintage.

Dervin, F. (2012). *Impostures interculturelles*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Haag, P. & Lemieux, C. (2012). *Faire des Sciences Sociales: Critiquer*. Paris: Les Éditions de l'EHESS.

Holliday, A. (2010). *Intercultural Communication and Ideology*. London: Sage.

Said, E. W. (1996). *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Vintage Books.