



BOOK REVIEW

Educational research: An unorthodox introduction

Gert Biesta

London: Bloomsbury Academic (2020) 169pp, paperback £24.99

ISBN: 978-1-350-09797-1

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I am transported straight back to secondary school; instantly refreshed is the long-forgotten sense of overwhelming dread that being asked to write a book review elicited. As a dyslexic, my formative years were dogged by the fear of reading and writing (about reading). It is hard to shake these early experiences where education was didactic and without dialogue or sympathy.

The opportunity to read and review Gert Biesta's *Educational Research: An Unorthodox Introduction* provided the perfect reason to set aside my childhood experiences, little did I know that it would lead me to question my intentions and challenge the need for my research and my relationship with it.

Gert Biesta's works have for some time influenced my practice. I found within his books and articles a clear push against the educational experiences of my youth, providing a joyous release that is not about replacing one theory for another but providing a process of thought and dialogue that offers an opportunity for individual (re)conceptualisation. At the centre of this for me is his commitment to exploring Dewey's work on the relationship between education, communication and participation in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013), helpfully 'suggest[ing] an approach in which education is seen as something educators and students do together' (Biesta, 2013 p.32). This simple statement provided me with a foundational justification for building and developing a democratic approach to my community music practices and experiences: acknowledging Dewey's transactional approach to experience.

It is maybe because of my previous engagement with Biesta's works that I find my writing is heavily influenced by autoethnographic writing and research approaches. It is my intention in this review to share my experience of reading *Educational Research: An Unorthodox Introduction* (Biesta, 2020) 'in a way that evokes the imagination of the reader' (Muncey, 2010). I have aimed to acknowledge and value my relationship with others (the author, peers and readers) whilst balancing intellectual and methodical rigour, emotion and creativity (Adams et. al., 2015). I hope that this allows the review to embody my experience in what Speedy (2005) would call a 'parcel of knowledge-in-context.'

Biesta's book is aimed at PhD students and early career researchers. Although the book is not intended as a textbook, Biesta suggests that:

“This book does not provide an alternative introduction to educational research, and even less so an introduction to alternative ways of doing educational research. It is rather meant to raise questions and explore issues that are often absent in more orthodox introductions to the field.” (Biesta, 2020 pp. 3)

He goes on to encourage us to read his book alongside more orthodox introductions. He wisely doesn't give guidance on what the more orthodox introductions should be, allowing the reader to pursue their own journey in exploring their own conception of educational research.

This, like many of Biesta's works, is not hefty at 169 pages: in comparison to the mighty research tomes that stare down at me intimidatingly from the bookshelf however the writing style is dense. I hasten to add that I do not use 'dense' in the negative. The potential for experience and development of knowledge is extensive. At all times he weaves a rich discussion where every sentence is meaningfully constructed. I remember first encountering his writing through *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (2010) and finding that I had to approach it without distraction to ensure the text was studied or critiqued, not simply read. Biesta's commitment to his core beliefs in educational practice and research, which are heavily influenced by John Dewey, strengthen across his writing and in particular in this new work where he reconceptualises them for this specific audience. Although an awareness of his previous writing is not necessary it would be helpful.

In the prologue we are introduced to the German term *Denkanstöße* understood by Biesta as 'invitations for thinking and perhaps even provocation for thinking' (Biesta, 2020 p.5). This clearly sets the tone for the book. For me, it provided an early indication that the questioning should be cyclical with the answers found in one chapter challenged in the next.

As an early career lecturer this book could not have come to me at a better time. As I struggle towards my first doctoral review and its necessary hoops, Biesta has provided me with a fresh perspective on many educational research orthodoxies.

The central eight chapters of the book are clearly structured. Each chapter starts with a clear introduction that sets out the need for, and approach to, the forthcoming discussion. The discussions unfold in a range of styles, some in case study format others through an encyclopaedic knowledge of the pertinent literature. The discussion is never forceful but at all times engages with Biesta's initial intention to invite thought. Each chapter is drawn together in wonderfully and often powerfully succinct conclusions before he poses questions drawn from the discussion for consideration. The questions are thoughtfully and provocatively worded. It is in these questions that the power of this book lies. As an example, the first of these questions asked at the end of Chapter 1 clearly sets the tone, 'What would be your honest answer to the question of why you are doing research at all?' (Biesta, 2020)

Each chapter provided me with multiple challenges, I have decided not to explore these here as it would be unfair of me to pre-empt your reflexive dialogue with this book. However, I do suggest that you enter

this journey with an open mind and with an intention to challenge and question what you know and maybe more importantly what you have been asked to accept.

In the epilogue, Biesta is clear that his intention is not to create an 'argument *against* educational research' but the opportunity to 'show with more precision what research is and what it is not' (Biesta, 2020 p.151). My experience of studying and applying the questions of this book to my own research journey ensures I now critically challenge my research intentions and practices and will continue to do so. I will no longer accept the orthodoxies, or circus hoops, that have been laid out for me if they do not enhance and progress the work that I identify as necessary to 'understand and do research, in, on and for education' (Biesta, 2020).

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