
Michael Armstrong: a continuing conversation

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Where are the emissaries and anthropologists from the intellectual stratum to the child estate? There are great childhood themes in the arts, in painting and prose and music. ... we remain as adult intellectuals, ethnocentric, i.e. adult-centred. Some very important things remain alien to us and our humanity is impaired.
(Hawkins, 1974, p. 43)

Teachers are both representatives and critics of the wider culture. ... no intuition, on the part of a young writer, is too elementary to challenge the teacher, as reader, to think again.
(Armstrong, 2006, p. 180)

Michael Armstrong has been, and continues to be, for me, a deeply influential teacher, through his example, and through our conversations both face to face and through his writing.

1970s, top coffee bar, Countesthorpe College; after school: tea, Mars bars, cheese cobs. Michael amongst a crowd of teachers reviewing the day, exchanging stories.

Michael was one of the chief architects of the team system at Countesthorpe. It was a way of organising the school day/week/spaces/people to create a context which reconciled the principle of the learner's autonomy with a commitment to a common curriculum which embraced the major disciplines of human thought. It was a context where:

teachers and students could take part in a kind of continual conversation with each other – not a dialogue, discussion or argument but something more free-ranging, intimate, expressive and egalitarian, that is to say, a conversation. Only through conversation, so we felt, could a teacher learn to identify and value the intellectual

demands and interests of his students and a student those of his teacher. (Armstrong & King, 1977, p. 54)

Conversation is where it began, for me, and has continued, with students and children, teachers and artists. There is something to be written about the nature of such conversations, their alert, provisional, passionate and exploratory nature; conversations of surprise and affirmation which have shaken me to the core and which have been a kind of unfolding. The art of these conversations began, perhaps, before those coffee bar days, but it was Michael who pushed me to be more alert to my conversations with students and, therefore, to refine and develop how such conversations might work.

At Countesthorpe, we worked closely with up to thirty students: learning to listen, cajole, inspire; learning the push and pull of adolescent passions; learning how to tread the fine line between imposition and distance. Here is where I learned the craft of teaching: its intellectual and emotional demands; the subtleties of creating a context from which the student could make strong decisions about what they might learn; how I could draw on what I knew and understood in response to what students were teaching me all the time. Countesthorpe students, in conversation, through their generosity, their kindness, their good humour, their righteous anger and, sometimes, their downright grumpiness, shaped my understandings. It is through conversations with them that I began to acquire skills and understanding that have stood me in good stead when meeting with postgraduate research students, when spending time with children. It was Michael who helped me to make sense of what I was learning. If I could have stayed there, working with those students in that way, I would have done so always.

In those end-of-school meetings in the coffee bar new teachers like me, and the more experienced, shared the stories of the day, not simply in the anecdotal way that teachers sometimes do – though the fearful roller-skating girls and the runaway boys were included in the mix – but stories of how learning seemed to be happening. Stories of unexpected interests, violent and tender experiences, the knowledge of car engines or of the life of hedgerows that students brought with them. And how we had responded: our hits and misses; our wrangling with questions of a next step or a way towards resolution. Michael took all our stories seriously. His way of responding, and his stories of his own encounters with students, created the spaces where I could think more deeply about how I was working within the many different conversations of my day.

Michael's exuberance; Michael playing ping pong in the afternoon; Scott Joplin at the Sounds concert; Michael drawn, through his engagement with a student's reflections on her visits to a primary school, to the intellectual life of young children and the idea that led him to work as a teacher researcher at Sherard Primary School and which formed the basis for Closely Observed Children.

In his account (in Watts [1977], *The Countesthorpe Experience*) of Carol's visits and reflections on her work in a local primary school, Michael reveals the seriousness with which he approaches the thinking of others. Carol's accounts of her visits record her initial difficulties and then the breakthrough which allowed her to communicate more freely with children whom she'd found uncommunicative. Michael observed that Carol 'discovered how to enter imaginatively into the childhood of others and how to talk to children and work with them and study them. Each discovery has emerged in part out of experience and intuition and in part out of reflecting on experience and intuition in talk and writing' (Watts, 1977, p. 90). For his own part, Michael reflects that time spent in the classroom alongside Carol, and in reading and talking over her writing, 'enriched [his] understanding of how to observe children and how to create relationships with them, in ways [he] would not have discovered for [himself]' (p. 91).

He highlights, also, a particular challenge related to this kind of work for him as a secondary school teacher. Carol's extreme slowness at reading had developed into a genuine aversion to it and so Michael is troubled by the split between 'dry didacticism' and 'intuitive grasp of particularity'; the danger of 'splitting apart the generalisations and conceptualisations from that intuitive grasp of particularity which had been Carol's supreme advantage' (p. 91).

Michael identifies, in Carol's writing and talk, her 'sharp sense of what is significant'. He considers her diary to be 'a piece of critical discrimination of a high order' (p. 92). The 'interconnectedness of imaginative insight and patient toil' (p. 92) is a condition to be sought after in developing the thinking of adolescents. The integration of particular insights based on careful observation into a broader conceptualisation of the observed is not easily achieved. Michael called for there to be many examples of similar patterns of learning in order for us to better understand how they can be achieved. I wonder whether the first step towards broader understanding is precisely the kind of reflection and re-evaluation that Carol undertook and that such steps, taken in the context of productive conversation with an informed other, have greater weight than Michael accorded them; that students must conceptualise, for themselves, the experience that will then orientate them as readers of more abstract thinking. And that they do arrive at conclusions that go well beyond the superficial or the unsubstantiated claim. Here is Gary, a 16-year-old student concluding his investigation of the imagination:

I didn't really go to the crèche in order to do a project on imagination, it just evolved that way. I think that maybe was because most of the things I like are pretty much rooted in the imagination
 ...
 ... Imagination was just a word that meant little pictures in the mind and good ideas when I started. But now I see that it is a lot more complicated than that ...
 ... so my views of imagination have changed and I think I would have changed more if I had been able to carry on with my project. ...

Being as I thought my last lesson [in a primary school] was the best, I think that I had found the right formula for the sort of writing that I would have liked them to do. So I think I would have preferred a few more lessons to do more of this... I don't think that reading material helped me very much. Although Michael Armstrong's book *Closely Observed Children* helped me more than any other. (Smith, 1991, p. 115)

For English secondary school students, the conditions that foster such learning are now very much harder to come by. However, in-service and pre-service teachers face similar challenges. I am particularly interested in the high-order skills of observation and reflection that teachers develop. Most teachers and student teachers do find a way of drawing on their reading to inform their thinking in action; however, it is not always straightforward, and some fail to make the links with reading that allow them to arrive at the kind of conceptual frameworks that will continue to inform their thinking as teachers. Others find it difficult to find the language that properly represents their complex understandings. I have learned that an understanding of learning comes slowly and that thinking is modified by reading and re-reading; by moving back and forth between the action of teaching and learning and an engagement with ideas; that we thrive in the companionship of others who join with us in conversation.

Michael, the sharer of reading: Michael, at monthly meetings, at conferences, at the critical friends group he established as part of his work at Sherard School, presenting children's works and responding to the presentations of others; his capacity to critically engage with junk models, find the kernel of a story, patterns on a peg board, the composition of a painting of trees; the exuberance and seriousness of a young child's thinking; the intellectual life of play.

Michael's work at Sherard School was shaped, in the first instance, by his reading of David Hawkins' collection of essays, *The Informed Vision* and, by extension, Frances Hawkins' *The Logic of Action* and the work of Prospect School. Michael took up Hawkins' proposal that the important study of children's intellectual development should be undertaken over time and through close encounters between adult and child. As Lorenz swam with his goslings, so we, in order to be the 'best scientific observers ... must be at once the best providers for and the best teachers of those whom we would study' (Hawkins, 1974, p. 45). Sherard School, and, in particular, Stephen Rowlands' classroom, provided Michael with the opportunity to work alongside eight- and nine-year-olds in the kind of rich environment which allowed them to engage seriously with the world. It made visible ways in which children develop their understandings, enter creatively into a culture, reconstruct knowledge.

Hawkins' essay, 'Childhood and the Education of Intellectuals', emphasises the critical importance of linking teaching with observation and analysis in any sustained effort to develop 'a theory of the life of reason from

the beginnings of learning' (Hawkins, 1974, p. 41). In my experience, the fusing of teaching, observation and analysis, especially in the company of others, is fundamental to a deeper understanding of children's intellectual growth. The readings which inform any analysis may not be those that are immediately obvious. Perhaps we should not be too disappointed with Carol's early understanding of primary school children or those of early teachers. Careful observation and subsequent reflection is a rich source of understanding and awareness, wonderfully considered in Patricia Carini's 'Meditation: on description' (2001, p. 163). Vivian Gussin Paley ('you must read *Wally's Stories*', Michael told me) rarely references her reading. The readings which Michael himself references are particular to him and reflect his own line of thought. Some of these have become some of my own most frequented texts. Hawkins is amongst these, especially his essay 'I, Thou, and It':

Respect for the young is not a passive, hands-off attitude. It invites our own offering of resources, it moves us toward the furtherance of their lives, even, at times, toward remonstrance or intervention ... To have respect for children is more than recognizing their potentialities in the abstract, it is also to seek out and value their accomplishments – however small these may appear by the normal standards of adults ...

No child, I wish to say, can gain competence as a knower, save through communication with others involved with him in his enterprises. Without a Thou, there is no I evolving. Without an It there is no content for the context, no figure and no heat. (Hawkins, 1974, pp. 49, 52)

I have come to see a key task of the teacher as that of seeking out what it is the learner understands, what drives them, and then, what it is that will pique their interest. I must be open to the other in order to draw from what I know and understand whatever it is that will engage the learner and respond to her curiosity and desire. As a teacher, I have tried to learn how best to 'seek out and value their accomplishments'. Michael's regard for others and for children in particular was compelling. The generosity of his engagement lay at the core of his teaching. He was able to create the spaces that allowed us, adults and children, to learn for ourselves, changed as we have been by our conversations with him. Michael encouraged my attempts to get some purchase on the intellectual development of students with whom I worked at Countesthorpe and then to reflect on the nature of teaching. Conversation with students; careful, extended observation; the conviviality of conversations with peers; the companionship of learning; reflection and the keeping of journals; and measured, close attention to children's works are elements of practice that I owe to Michael. All these are in service to the question, what next? They have their origins in our different but shared experiences of Countesthorpe and seem to anticipate the pattern of attending and responding that is crystallised in the final chapter of *Children Writing Stories* (Armstrong, 2006, pp. 165-186).

Teaching, in the context of works and the making of works, is, above all else, an interpretative art. (Armstrong, 2006, p. 179)

Michael, in his conceptualisation of a 'pedagogy of the imagination', places creativity at the centre of the curriculum; 'it is neither the end nor a decorative accompaniment ... Creativity is the highway to skill' (2006, p. 177).

Once the productive imagination is placed at the heart of curriculum practice, children's works, the products of their imagination, become the focus of educational interest and attention and the classroom is transformed into a workshop whose members ... are partners in a collaborative enterprise. (Armstrong, 2006, p. 178)

Michael proposes 'four moments in the process of interpretation', that is, to inhabit the work, and in so doing believe in it; to draw out the work's intention; to re-present the work to the maker; and to consider the future as implicit in the work of the present. Here are echoes of Hawkins and of the work of Prospect School, beautifully represented in Patricia Carini's collection of essays, *Starting Strong: a different look at children, schools and standards*. Michael proposes moments in the interpretation of children's narratives. These principles can apply to all children's works and to their making of works in the way that Prospect School made possible. Such close attention to children's works, careful listening, detailed observation and description inform and enrich the task of teaching.

The study of a single child can play a crucial part in our development as teachers. At the University of East Anglia, the Primary PGCE course includes an assignment which draws on Michael's work, using Prospect School's Descriptive Review as its frame. Students create a descriptive portfolio of one child. It includes extended observations, conversations and an analysis of children's works. Students reflect on their findings within a group of critical friends and, finally, present the child and their developing understanding of the child to a group of peers and experienced teachers.

In December 2015, Michael joined us to hear students' presentations and to contribute to the discussions that followed each presentation.

Michael, sitting with PGCE students, listening intently to their presentations; lit up by their stories of children, their close observations, their collected works: paintings; models, imaginative play; his baffling, probing questions; his speculations and celebration of young learners.

Michael was very taken by the stories the students were able to tell, by the quality of their observations; he was intrigued by the story of a four-year-old who presented her teacher with a white feather and the student whose detailed extended observation enabled her to see patterns in a child's use of imitation in talk, model-making, drawing and painting. Michael appreciated the way the student reflected on the work of a child who hungered to imitate particular visual forms and repeatedly drew the same concentric pattern. It seemed to the

student that these imitations were beyond 'mere copying' and she wrestled with the puzzle of it.

That Michael was able to attend these presentations was important to me. His influence was there in the conception and shaping of this assignment; his presence, observations and insights valued by students and tutors. Here is Michael's first response to the experience, a response which perhaps gives you a sense of the kind of teacher he was for me – and for many others.

Thank you so much for inviting me to sit in on your students' presentations. I enjoyed every moment and I felt greatly encouraged by the thoughtfulness and enthusiasm of your students. On the way back home I began to think a little about the presentations as a whole. As I said at the start, I felt that the instructions were superbly thorough, as detailed as anyone might wish for, even the most hostile critics. I guess that in performance I felt that the students were happier with looking at the personality of their chosen boy or girl, rather than their learning. I suppose that's just what you might expect of would be teachers who are only just starting off. I wonder whether it might be possible to ask them to select one example of their pupil's learning to analyse in some detail. Admittedly that might be hard, with only ten minutes for the whole presentation, but perhaps they could add to their analysis in the portfolios they present as evidence. As it was I thought that your students often displayed work from their chosen pupils which looked really interesting but then had little to say about it.

They were better at observation than at interpretation. It might give them ideas about interpretation if they were to read some of the Reggio Emilia pamphlets, particularly *Shoe and Meter* which I see as a seminal text – if that's not too pompous a way of putting it. Anyway these are just immediate first thoughts. You have, as always, given me so much to think about.

Michael, in his engagement with children's learning, shows us the way and makes it look easy. He brings a particular sensibility to the work. Student teachers are at the beginning of a long engagement with children's learning. Often, it is hard for them to find the conditions that Michael found and created, that allow the classroom to be 'a workshop whose members ... are partners in a collaborative enterprise' (Armstrong, 2006, p. 178). I still want to engage with Michael on the subject of interpretation and analysis. Perhaps we should develop a deeper sense of the complexity and value of careful observation. The business of analysis and generalisation seems to remain as problematic for many student teachers as it was for Carol. There is a value in immersing oneself in the mess of teaching and learning, of learning to tolerate its indeterminacy before rushing too quickly to interpretation. I know very well that Michael welcomed the tentative and speculative and was not advocating complete answers. Still, we need to consider how teachers enter into the life and mind of the child in ways

that will have an impact on teaching. In a time when many, just as David Hawkins wrote forty years ago, accept children only as 'future adults', it is rare to find those environments that make learning visible, where adults take seriously the estate of childhood. Much hope resides in the vision of the young people I have met and worked with who choose to be teachers and who carry forward Michael Armstrong's insights and humanity into their own understandings of teaching and learning.

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