Entertaining doubts: on frivolity as resistance

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“Basic Language” is the language of surrender and forgetting.
Lyotard (1992: 109)

I want to play with the notion of frivolity as resistance, and its possible contribution to the doing of education and educational research. Frivolity is a project, or at least a posture, with a long history in literature, art and cultural politics, and this paper argues for continuing that dishonourable tradition. In particular, I will propose frivolity as a way of discomposing the language of policy and thereby of unsettling its totalising ambitions. Sadly, the paper isn’t itself very frivolous. In arguing the case for frivolity rather than performing it, I have failed to free myself from the sober conventions of academic writing-as-usual. ¹

First, I want to consider frivolity ‘as’ resistance in a particular way – as another word, as it were, for resistance ‘itself’. Taking my cue from Derrida’s (1980) ‘archaeology of the frivolous’ in his text of the same title, I understand frivolity to be whatever threatens the serious business of establishing foundations, frames, boundaries, generalities or principles. Frivolity is what interferes with the disciplining of the world. Think of some of the binary oppositions that structure our ways of knowing, being and judging; and think of them as serious and frivolous:

- depth is serious; surface is frivolous
- essence is serious; appearance is frivolous
- competence is serious; performance is frivolous
- authenticity is serious; pretence is frivolous
- truth is serious; lies are frivolous

In some discourses it even turns out that:

- men are serious; women are frivolous;
- adults are serious; children are frivolous.

In this familiar Derridean structure of pairs, frivolity is always on the bad side of the binary. Indeed, Derrida argued, the frivolous is the bad side of the binary. It’s whatever won’t or can’t behave itself, or absent itself, to allow the serious business of

¹ This is a version of a keynote presentation to the Discourse, Power, Resistance Conference, Plymouth University, March 2005.
producing truth, knowledge, self or reality – of making them ‘present’ – work itself through to completion.

Looking across the many different offences of frivolity, Derrida (1980: 118) concluded that they all shared one property: that of being satisfied with ‘tokens’ rather than with the ‘real thing’. Philosophy would be one example of a discipline with a lively fear of frivolity, in its recurring nightmare of lapsing into literature (cf Derrida, 1981). That’s why philosophy has had such a hard time embracing its own status as writing. It is haunted by the fear that it will remain trapped in tokens and textuality, poisoned by stylistic pretension, instead of breaking through to truth. Writing opens a gap between thought and word, signified and signifier, real things and tokens. Or, it draws attention to the gap that necessarily exists (cf MacLure, 2003).

Ultimately, according to Derrida, ‘the frail structure of the frivolous’ is nothing more, or less, than this gap or crack in the sign itself (1980: 132). It’s the essential spacing or différence that produces meaning by allowing texts to ‘represent’ the real – ‘the thing, Man, history, what is’ (Nancy, 1996: 110) - but precludes escape to any extra-textual high ground of direct access to this good stuff. Frivolity resists closure then – of certainty, finality, generality, holism, universality, transparency. But if, by resisting closure, frivolity does the work of opening, its openings are ambiguous. They could just as easily be thought of as blockages or impediments. In either case, because frivolity inheres in the sign, it’s an accident waiting to happen, liable to break through whether you work for it or not. Indeed Method can be seen as the ongoing struggle to contain its unruly potential. ‘The method for reducing the frivolous is method itself. In order not to be the least frivolous, being methodic suffices’, says Derrida (1980: 125). But I want to commend frivolity as something that researchers might seek out and help to set in motion rather than try to contain.

Resisting the ‘already-said’

Let’s take a look then at the political possibilities of frivolity. I want to propose frivolity as an ethical, critical and practical response to contemporary educational policy discourses. These seem to be inclined, world wide, to closure – of dissent, diversity and unpredictability. In England, reform at all levels of the education system has pursued ‘transparency’, effectiveness, uniformity of ‘delivery’ and inexorably rising standards. A national curriculum prescribes what shall be taught in schools, and by what methods, enforced by a mirror curriculum for teacher education, and by national testing and inspection regimes. Research is disciplined by the rewards and punishments of the Research Assessment Exercise, and qualitative methodologies are out of favour for failing to deliver hard evidence.

These are policies of closure, based on fantasies of ‘presence’. They attempt to repress and control the gaps and uncertainties out of which teaching, learning and research issue. They construe teachers as mere conduits for the transmission of packages of knowledge into learners’ heads, and assume that the knowledge thus conveyed can be assimilated uniformly, without delay or detour. They envisage

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3 Lyotard (1992: 107)
4 See Lather (2005: 5) for an account of the ‘frenzy for accountability’ in the US which has many parallels with the UK scene,
learning and teaching as a colourless, passionless pursuit, and the curriculum as a static body of knowledge over which teachers and learners have little prerogative. They see scholarship and research as unruly practices in need of regulation. They exhibit, in short, that impulse towards mastery of knowledge that Derrida called ‘the desire to rejoin the simple’ (1998: 27). What such policies conceal are the pain, conflict, failure, chance, irrationality and non-countable events that are also, unavoidably, implicated in teaching and learning. Deborah Britzman (1998: 133) notes that the cost of this suppression of conflict and ambivalence, of always ‘putting the good inside and the bad outside’, is that it returns to haunt education as ‘unruly students, as irrelevant questions, and as controversial knowledge in need of containment’.

I’m particularly interested in the way policy disciplines and redefines practice through language and discourse. People are required to phrase their compliance in the official policy lexicon of targets, delivery, transparency etc. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS), to take one example, is a fabrication of neologisms, buzz-words, and magpie borrowings from motley vocabularies – ‘bookbanking’, ‘teacher scribing’, ‘powerful verbs’, ‘quality first teaching’, ‘strategy checks’, ‘hot seating’, and so on. Teachers and students are obliged to use these words and, in so doing, to redescribe their practice. It’s not just a matter of vocabulary. In the NLS and its sibling, the National Numeracy Strategy, as in the corresponding training and inspection regimes, teaching and learning are broken down into minute parts, relabelled and reassembled in modules and units, timed to the minute and laminated into lists of objectives.

Like any discourse therefore, these policies impose structures, levels and taxonomies on the flux of experience. They set limits on the ways that the world can be viewed and construed, determine what can and can’t be said, and establish what will count as truth. They institute orders of importance amongst entities and concepts, and assert which ones ‘belong’ together. Most significantly of all, they define what kind of subject – teacher, student, inspector, researcher – it is possible to be. Those who speak the language of the National Strategies, or of Ofsted inspection, or the Research Assessment Exercise, necessarily bend themselves into the new shapes afforded by their disciplinary syntax and hierarchies of significance.

So what? After all, we are always subjected to one truth regime or other – summoned to speak and compelled to be silent, bent into shape by prevailing discourses. But discourses generally develop in a more ragged and piecemeal fashion, outside the ambit of particular individuals or groups (cf Foucault 1980). These contemporary policy initiatives seem more monolithic: more comprehensive and intensive in their project of regulating the practice of educationists and learners, right down to the very point where words issue from their mouths, or pass from their fingertips onto the page or screen. They betray the desire for closure with a vengeance – a near total aversion to uncertainty and an implacable indifference to singularity. They are often wedded to a rigid, scientistic ‘fundamentalism’ that contemporary science has pretty much abandoned (Lather, 2005; cf also St. Pierre, 2002). Coupled with enforced compliance through audit, UK policy amounts to the same kind of ‘bullying’ of research and practice that Lather (2005: 13) detects in the US context.

As far as the UK situation is concerned, I’m not really sure whether these new policy discourses, with their toy science and their dogged quality-controlling of educational
work, offer fewer or more footholds for resistance than do discourses in the usual sense. Because they are more blatant, they may be easier to spot and to resist. Still, faced with the hubris of the appetite for mastery that they display, and in particular with their meddlesome interventions in the scene of writing, the time may have come to actively mobilise the potential for frivolity and farce that haunts all closure-seeking discourses.

In his ‘Gloss on Resistance’, Lyotard (1992) has some interesting things to say about writing, and the threat that it poses to totalitarianism. Revisiting Orwell’s 1984 and the significance of Newspeak for totalitarian projects, he notes that Newspeak abhors writing’s ‘uncontrollable contingency’. Newspeak wants language to be able to say only what it already knows, whereas writing, for Lyotard, is a constant struggle to say something new, and hence something unpredicted and idiomatic, against the grain of the rules and conventions of language.

To say what [language] already knows how to say is not writing. One wants to say what it does not know how to say but what one imagines it should be able to say. One violates it, one seduces it, one introduces into it an idiom unknown to it. When this desire disappears – this desire for it to be able to say something other than what it already knows how to say – when language is felt to be impenetrable and inert, rendering all writing vain, it is called Newspeak’ (1992: 105)

Lyotard’s point was that Newspeak, as the drive to subdue what is singular and uncontrollable in language, is a contemporary phenomenon. And if you look at UK education policy, you can see that propensity to operate in ‘the mode of the already-said’ (1992: 107; my italics). Education workers, whether in the inspection service, the local authorities, schools, colleges or universities, are obliged to report their activities and to assess themselves and others according to structures, categories and bullet-pointed lists of objectives that are substantially pre-written by the authority or agency that regulates their work. It’s largely a matter of filling in the blanks. Language is indeed ‘inert’ and words are always being put into people’s mouths. Everyone who has anything to do with training, implementing, assessing or inspecting the national curriculum or the national Strategies is now supposed to be reading from the same script - quite literally as we shall see below - from Local Education Authority trainers and ‘consultants’, through teacher educators, student teachers, class teachers and teaching assistants, to learners in classrooms, not to mention the inspectors whose job is to check up on them all, and the testing agencies and textbook publishers who reap the financial rewards. They will all be working from packages that specify objectives for every activity; how long each activity should take (to the nearest minute); its position and reference number within a nested structure of sessions, units and modules; and which actions to perform – eg which OHT to call up, which materials to select, what document to pull out of the accompanying file, which video segment to play, when to switch the cassette player on. In many cases, the trainer or practitioner will even be told what to say.

5 Lyotard’s ‘contemporary’ was the mid 1980s, when the original, French version of the ‘Gloss’ was published. However the political and mass-mediatised conditions that he identified are, if anything, more pervasive at the start of the new millennium,
Let’s look at a few examples. They happen to be taken from the national literacy intervention programmes, since that is an area in which I have a special interest. However the skeletal structure of modules, units, categories and objectives, the paraphernalia of OHTs, course documents and support materials, and the scripting of practice are characteristic of training and implementation packages across all aspects of educational activity. There is a new ‘grammar’ of training, curriculum and assessment in which practice is parsed into component parts and recombined in an inflexible, linear syntax that allows only one route through a bounded area of knowledge.

The extract below shows the scripting of practice in its most explicit form. It comes from the ‘Session Materials’ for teaching assistants delivering the national ‘Early Literacy Support Programme’ (ELS) (DfES 2001). Every one of the 60 ELS sessions follows an identical structure of Oral Opener, Phonics Five, Text Ten, Fast Finisher and Take Away. The teaching assistant’s contributions, partly delivered via a puppet, are wholly scripted, providing both stage directions and lines. This fragment comes from the ‘Text Ten’ segment on ‘Guided Reading’ in Week 3, Session 15: Friday. The italics indicate the words that the teaching assistant is to say.

**Book introduction:** show the children a copy of the book. Look at the front cover: *Do you remember what the Baby Bear said when he saw that the bowl was empty?* Take the children’s suggestions and then point to the words: *Somebody’s Been Eating My Porridge!*

Look back at the back cover. Point to the speech bubble. *Do you remember that we wrote a speech bubble? Who’s talking this time?* (Baby Bear.)

DfES (2001: 36; italics in original)

It’s interesting that the script requires teaching assistants to parrot a form of teacherly talk that has been severely criticised in decades of research into classroom discourse: ie the asking of ‘closed’ questions that make children reach for the one right answer that the teacher has in mind (eg Edwards & Furlong, 1978, among many others). These scripts are simulations of the kind of classroom talk that many analysts consider to be at best minimally educational, since it puts children in a very passive role as learners.

The Additional Literacy Support programme for use with children at Key Stage 2 similarly gives scripted directions to the teaching assistants charged with delivering the intervention. Also provided is a set of ‘lesson scripts’. These are not to be followed verbatim but are ‘provided to give a feel of the lesson beforehand – the sort of vocabulary to use, the sort of encouragement to give the children – a general overview of how a “perfect lesson” might go.” (DfEE, 1999b: 155). The scripts again follow a very ‘traditional’ discourse structure of teacher-led talk. And as with so much of contemporary curriculum training, they purvey a crude, inflexible, one-best-way vision of teaching and learning.

Even the people at the top of the food chain - those who ‘train the trainers’ - are likely to be following scripts. The excerpt below comes from the ‘Literacy Module’ issued by the DfES (2004) to train LEA staff to train classroom teachers to train teaching assistants to provide ‘further literacy support’ in secondary schools. This is the now-familiar ‘cascade’ model of training: ie the systemic chain along which the ‘already-
said’ passes from policy to practice. The register is slightly different from the script for the primary teaching assistants, and the script allows more leeway for the participants to ad lib, but the module disciplines the bodies and the voices of the target audience of Local Education Authority trainers in much the same way:

Show OHT 1.2 and hold up a copy of the KS3 Framework for teaching English Years 7, 8 and 9 (2004: 3).

Explain that OHT 3.1 summarises our expectations for a young reader by the end of Key Stage 3.

Advising the participants that as they probably read a wide variety of texts every day, for all sorts of reasons, it can be difficult for them to understand what a very complicated process is going on. Once we are competent readers, we can read without thinking about it. We can also adapt the way we read to suit different situations. Tell them we are going to take the reading process apart and examine the range of individual skills that a reader can draw on at any time. (2004: 16)

Many of the literacy exemplar materials and activities are recycled, reappearing across intervention programmes and training packages aimed at different personnel or different Key Stages of the national curriculum. The above instructions refer to one such activity, which appeared in the original NLS Training Pack (DfEE 1998) and crops up in each of the intervention programmes. It involves an extract of semi-nonsense prose, beginning ‘The greep dawked forily prip the blortican’, designed to show how readers use their grammatical ‘skills’ to decipher text (see Appendix for the text of the activity). All round the country every year, in all sorts of classrooms and training venues, greeps will be found dawking prip the blortican.

The citational history of this particular activity is spelled out in one of the packages, in terms that incidentally underscore the extent to which practice has become bureaucratised through labels, reference numbers, colour codes and acronyms. I would advise readers to skim the paragraph and not to spend too much time trying to decode it: it will be almost incomprehensible to readers who have not already been at least partially re-constructed by the grammar and technology of the NLS.

An activity in the NLS Literacy Training Pack (Distance Learning Pack) Module 2 (Orange) Word Level Work Unit 1 pages 7–12 explains the intricacies of the process of reading. You may wish to revisit the cassette and booklet to remind you of this activity. If you haven’t already undertaken that training, the activity is reproduced below. You will need Cassette 1 from the Literacy Training Pack (‘lunchbox’). (LEA presenters, please refer to the booklet and cassette; Handout 1 (OHTs 11–13) is provided to use this activity with an audience.) (DfES, 1999a: 9)

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6 ‘After LEAs have trained teachers on the LPUs [Literacy Progress Units], schools will have a responsibility to cascade this training to their TAs and other interested staff.’ (DfES, 2004: 38)
This is the ‘impenetrable and inert’ language of new millennial Newspeak. The parenthetic reference to the ‘lunchbox’ provides a telling little glimpse of how the NLS appropriates and regulates what is idiomatic in language – one of the key characteristics of Newspeak in Lyotard’s (1992) account. The ‘lunchbox’ is what the NLS Training Package was called by teachers and trainers, slightly mockingly, because of the cardboard box with a handle and clasp that holds the various components. Embraced by the official discourse of the NLS, the lunchbox surrenders its vernacular liveliness.

Even apparently spontaneous (ie ostensibly un-scripted) speech begins to look suspiciously pre-formed, in the videos that accompany the training and implementation packages. There’s a faint feeling of ‘here’s one I made earlier’ in the ‘scribing’ and ‘modeling’ sessions in the Key Stage 2 ‘Grammar for Writing’ video for instance (DfES, 2000), where the teacher articulately articulates her text-making decisions as she composes at the white- or blackboard, in front of the class. The children’s speech has a tidied up quality too, in interactions such as these:

T: Can anybody remember how she [author], built up a sense of mystery about the character, in that opening paragraph? […] (Child puts his hand up) Ben?

Ben: She used flashbacks to build up a feeling of mystery

Do children really talk like that?7

The pinning of practice to a corpus of examples and stock phrases strips it of flexibility and sensitivity to context and local needs. It is one further instance of the multiple ways in which teaching, learning, training and assessment have come to be regulated through the already-said. The overall result is a mimetic pedagogy of simulacra and ventriloquy that thwarts reflection, diminishes teachers’ agency and stunts learners’ autonomy. The extent and the extremity of the control that these policies attempt to exert over the language and bodies of learners and education professionals is a cause for concern and resistance.

Writing, as I have suggested throughout, is one promising site for resisting the deadening effects of the all-too-familiar. Lyotard notes that Newspeak can never wholly dispense with writing, and is therefore always in danger of becoming undone by its impropriety.

Even when totalitarianism has won, when it occupies the whole terrain, it is not fully realised unless it has eliminated the uncontrollable contingency of writing. So totalitarianism must renounce writing […] But if totalitarianism remains unwritten it cannot be total. On the other hand, should it attempt to be written, it would have to concede that with writing there is at least one region where restlessness, lack and “idiocy” come out into the open. And by

7 These observations first surfaced in discussions about the NLS videos with my former colleagues Jeni Smith, John Gordon and Ann Browne at the University of East Anglia. I’m grateful to them for those stimulating conversations.
conceding this, it gives up any hope of incarnating the totality, or even of controlling it. (105)8

Restlessness, lack and idiocy: this is the resistance of frivolity, and it needs to be mobilised against the idiom-hating closures of ‘basic language’ says Lyotard, for this is ‘the language of surrender and forgetting’ that tries to erase specificity and difference (109). What is needed, then, is writing that interrupts. To requote and rephrase Lyotard, this would be a writing of idiocy: writing that violates, seduces, introduces foreign idioms, refuses to stand still, is full of holes. Writing that resists the ‘already said’.9

Resistance based on rational argument – the usual resort of the academic critic – often seems beside the point these days, not just because of the totalising reach and penetration of the reforms, but because they do not acknowledge the legitimacy of those resources on which argument and critique have, for good or ill, traditionally been based: ie judgement, expertise, analytic reason, theoretical allegiances, recourse to history. To this extent policy is itself frivolous. It is amnesiac about its own historical antecedents, and licensed to ignore disciplinary coherence by the ‘what works’ criterion of performativity. Frivolity may have its capricious uses therefore in times and circumstances such as these.

Still, caveats are necessary. I am not suggesting that teachers, or assistants, or trainers, or researchers ever follow their scripts slavishly: that they are just puppets, or that they suddenly stop using their experience and professional judgement, or abandon their educational beliefs. What happens in face-to-face interactions between teachers and learners, or during training sessions, can never be fully insulated from the weight of past experience, personal conviction or the surprises of contingency, however tight the scripts of policy. And one of the things that can happen is frivolity. Coldron & Smith (1999: 319) report teachers’ ‘merciless laughter’ at the examples of ‘good’ teaching in the NLS training videos. As their example shows, it has been possible for critics to open up spaces for resistance (see also Hawarth, 2001; Skidmore et al, 2003). It also needs to be acknowledged that the new programmes often incorporate good practice, as judged by experienced practitioners and other experts. Many of the materials and packages that cascade upon the education ‘community’ are commissioned from highly experienced researchers and educators, who put a great deal of thought into how to introject their own educational visions into their

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8 Interestingly, Lyotard associates totalitarianism with ‘theory’: ‘Like theory which, hypothetically, keeps its head above the water of time, totalitarian bureaucracy likes to keep the event under its thumb’ (1992: 107). Both, he implies, fear the resistance of specificity and the singular.

9 I attempted a small act of frivolity myself, in a paper to the 2004 Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association entitled ‘”Clarity bordering on stupidity”: where’s the quality in systematic review?’ The paper was provocatively critical of one particular version of ‘systematic review’, a technology for synthesising research evidence that, in my view, exerts extreme control over the language and indeed the subjectivity of academics. Frivolity, like a joke, loses itself when it is explained so I will not elaborate (see MacLure 2005 for the published version). The paper certainly seems to have worked as provocation as it prompted a complaint to BERA Executive Council, who felt obliged to rush ahead with a draft ethics procedure in order to investigate the ‘case’. Was the frivolity a good idea? As always, the benefits of frivolity are chancy. The ethical procedure this act called forth may turn out to provide yet another disciplinary mechanism for policing methodological and linguistic orthodoxy in research. Concern about this kind of use of ethics committees and institutional review boards is growing across the social sciences: see for example Lincoln & Tierney (2004).
commissions.\textsuperscript{10} The problem is that the productive pedagogies and good ideas contained in the packages are strangled by the prescriptive, coercive frame.

It is also important to emphasise that my target is not policy makers, individually or collectively. I am not suggesting that policy makers are personally culpable, malign, unanimous in their views, or uniform in their intentions. I know from the personal testimony of colleagues that DfES representatives often make wise and productive contributions to project steering groups. What I am interested in is the way in which the discourse of policy ‘speaks’ in this particular way, often enough behind the backs of everyone concerned. And of course there is no single discourse of policy in any case. One could identify other discourses that run counter to the closure-loving ones, or at least seem to – practitioner-involvement, personalised learning, creativity, etc. I do not have space to pursue here the question of whether these latter trends mark a real shift in the locus of control or the aperture of closure exerted by policy. But it is salutary to recall that no discourse is monolithic or capable of wielding hegemonic control over subjects.

In any case, it could be argued that teaching has always operated in large measure in the ‘mode of the already-said’.\textsuperscript{11} Classroom discourse has proved especially stable over time and across cultures. With its craft traditions, its asymmetries of power and status, its instantly familiar teacher-orchestrated routines and its recurring topics (if it’s autumn it must be nuts, squirrels and brightly coloured leaves), it has always been strongly, if tacitly, scripted. If anything, the problem with the new policy discourses is that they further solidify the inertia already coded in the pedagogical encounter, and nurture precisely that which makes it harder for teachers and learners to work creatively with, and on, the unpredicted.

\textbf{The semi-respectable history of frivolity}

In a sense, the case I have made here for frivolity as resistance to closure is a very old one. It is possible to trace half-submerged tendencies in intellectual thought and cultural work that has been productively haunted by frivolity even if not always under that name. In the 20\textsuperscript{th} century there were irruptions of cultural work done under the influence of surrealism for instance, which took issue with prevailing definitions of the ‘proper’ object of art, or ethnography, or sociology or Marxism, and instead deliberately courted eccentricity and transgression of boundaries – ie the off-centre, decentred energy of frivolity.\textsuperscript{12} Transgressive counter-discourses can be traced much further back in time. Zeller and Farmer (1999) chart the confrontation between playful and serious discourse traditions from classical Greece onward, and find contemporary

\textsuperscript{10} There is also a risk of focussing too closely on the discursive minutiae of programmes and overlooking effects at other levels or in contexts, where policy may be giving voice to previously marginalised groups or producing other socially useful outcomes. The greatly increased recruitment of teaching assistants to deliver curriculum interventions may for instance be offering a foothold for women to continue on to higher education courses or to forms of work that they would not otherwise have contemplated.

\textsuperscript{11} This is true of all discourses, as I noted above. As sets of conventions governing the intelligibility of statements and the propriety of subjects, discourses are pre-eminently regimes of the already-said.

\textsuperscript{12} Derrida (1990) discusses and defends the project of eccentricity in his account of the state of literary criticism in the US of the 1980s and 90s. On the influence of surrealism on ethnography, see Clifford (1981); on mass observation, MacClancy (1995); on Walter Benjamin and ‘gothic Marxism’, Cohen (1993); on art theory, Krauss (1993).
resonances of that old fear of the frivolous in the linguistic jurisdiction of the manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), which regulates the language of academic journal writing. Botting (1996) describes the literary Gothic as resistance to the repressions of bourgeois ideology (and perhaps also as a way of dissipating the threat of that resistance). The art and philosophy of the baroque currently provide one of the most fertile sources of reclaimed transgressive energy. From art history (Bal 1999) to actor network theory (Law, 2003) to continental philosophy (Deleuze, 1992), the baroque provides exemplars of an entangled, confounded vision that resists the god’s eye perspective of Enlightenment thinking and the delusory clarity of scientism.

I take my cue then from others past and present who have glimpsed the antic power of the frivolous, and tried to harness its puny capacity to resist ‘elevation to generality’ (Smith, 1995). Acknowledging the frivolous forces critics and researchers to engage with matters they might rather overlook or incorporate – the particular, the marginal, the embarrassing and the recalcitrant. It might also help us to interrupt our own ‘surrender and forgetting’ of the discourses of power and oppression with which research is always entangled. It’s no coincidence that feminist and post-colonial critics of traditional social science have commended the ambivalent agency of the joker or trickster as a form of resistance to the administrative gaze of the researcher or colonizer.13

Lyotard sees the impulse towards simplification, in the face of a world that is becoming increasingly complex, as a threat to ‘humanity’. I propose frivolity as one way of resisting that rush to simplification, whose manifestation in educational discourse has been the topic of this paper. I will end with Lyotard’s (1992: 100) summary of the task facing humanity.

At a minimum this task implies a resistance to simplism and simplifying slogans, to calls for clearness and straightforwardness, and to desires for a return to solid values. Simplification is already starting to look barbarous or reactive. The “political class” will have to (already has to) reckon with this exigency if it is to avoid sinking into decrepitude and dragging humanity down with it as it goes.

(‘Ticket for a New Stage’)

13 See for instance Haraway (1992) and Bhabha (1994); and Johnson’s (1987) account of trickster figures in the literary and anthropological writing of Zora Neale Hurston.
References


Appendix

**Fig 2**

1. The group dawked fortly prar the blortcan. It
2. snoughted prar the melldock trippicant and
3. shrolled nong the creddges.

**Fig 3**

**Answers to questions**

- Where was the group dawking? prar the blortcan
- What sort of trippicant was i? a melldock trippicant

**ACTIVITY 1b**

**Instructions**

How were you able to answer these questions? Write your comments in the box below.

Please save these on the cassette.

**Fig 4**

- It snoughted prar the melldock trippicant and shrolled nong the creddges.
- It snoughted prar the melldock trippicant and shrolled nong the creddges.
- It snoughted prar the melldock trippicant but onty shrolled nong the creddges.
- It snoughted prar the melldock trippicant although it could hae shrolled nong the creddges.

**Fig 5**

3. Pronutally, the
4. group caught up with all the other dogs. They had
5. found a fresh murder burrow and were spooking
6. and muting round it.