

Start spreading the news: Writing educational psychology. A celebration of Andy Miller

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THIS IS AN ACCOUNT, more or less, of what I said at the day held to celebrate Andy's career to date. I find it hard to say, 'celebrate his retirement', since in my experience the word 'retirement' is a misnomer. It seems to me that few people 'retire'; they move into a different phase and are busy doing other things with the general idea that the work life balance has swung towards life. So, the celebration, as I saw it, was a transition ritual. I was asked to speak about Andy and writing. I had been aware of Andy's work, through his writing, and then it was through the editorial board of *Educational Psychology in Practice*, of which I was already a member, when he joined it in the mid-1980s. One way or another we have been together on editorial boards pretty much ever since. Through this but not solely because of it, a friendship grew. The title of my talk was given to me. I took it to mean that Andy has been and is a source of inspiration to get writing, to write about what it is that educational psychologists do and achieve, indeed, to spread the news.

Outline

I started my talk by speculating on the many Andy Millers we know (and don't know), contemplated a tradition of writing in the profession, considered what is involved in writing, drew attention to the scope of Andy's published work, and finished by highlighting three examples. And so, after this outline, this is what I said.

Which Andy Miller?

I have a friend who works for a large multinational company. Not so long ago he went to a leaving party for a senior manager in the company. It just so happened that the company CEO was in the UK and agreed to say something. After about three minutes, the senior manager interrupted the CEO to thank him for what he had said so far but to point out that the biographical details and achievements belonged to someone else in the company, who had the same name. The CEO muttered dark words about the HR department.

This led me to wonder what would happen if a prospective trainee EP googled Andy Miller. I carried out this exercise and 'hit' 551,000 Andy Millers in 0.09 seconds. (I tried it again, just now – and got 561,000 Andy Millers in 0.24 seconds). There's a lot of Andy Millers in the world. And they're only the ones that Google knows about.

Could this prospective trainee EP mistake 'our' Andy Miller for Andy Miller, a bearded Morris dancing software engineer from Hampshire? (Well, when I first met Andy, he had a beard and he has often visited Hampshire.) Could he be an acoustic guitar virtuoso and singer songwriter based in Glasgow? What about the editor of *Motor Gliders*? Maybe Andy Miller the basketball agent...or rugby player...or golfer...or video editor... or record producer? Could he be Andy Miller the author, whose second novel is *Casanova*? What about Andy Miller, the MP for Ellesmere Port and Neston, who proposed the Temporary and Agency Workers (Equal Treatment) Bill? And then, could it be Professor (sounds right) Andy

Miller who writes the most entertaining 'blog of a modern geek' (try the Kent Linux User Group and 'Spode's' entry for 2 June, 2008, for a real flavour).

Well, 'our' Andy Miller could almost be all of these Andy Millers combined. If we contemplate the Andy Miller of this celebration, he has as many parts to his life. Most of us (here today) know him as an educational psychologist, teacher and trainer; we know him for his academic writing and editing (after a time on the editorial board of *Educational Psychology in Practice* he switched to the editorial board of *Educational and Child Psychology*, as I did); some know him as a mountaineer and rock climber, as a walker (and have joined him on the South West Coast path) and a cyclist. Some will have read his articles on mountaineering and climbing, read the chapter he wrote on (his one and only) Bob Dylan, and read his poetry. A few might know that he keeps a detailed daily diary, that he has started writing the life story of one of his grandmothers, and that he started a book group in Nottingham, that continues to thrive. And of course, anyone that knows Andy knows what a brilliant conversationalist he is.

A tradition of writing

So, having cleared up the small matter of which Andy Miller, I want to turn to that aspect of Andy I have been asked to talk about: his writing.

Andy has continued a fine tradition of educational psychology professional practice: writing. He has continued the scientist-practitioner tradition that the first professional educational psychologist, Sir Cyril Burt, established. Whatever controversy later haunted Burt, in his time he was a prolific writer – authoring some 20 books and over 300 articles. There is also what might be viewed as a somewhat unexpected link between Burt and Andy, to which I will return.

There is something remarkable about our profession, though. When you think how relatively small it is, it is a profession that

sustains two journals, and a newsletter, publishing between them something in the region of 65 articles a year, the greater majority written by EPs. This is to exclude publications elsewhere and books. Educational psychologists are prolific authors. Andy and I have just finished editing an anniversary edition of *Educational and Child Psychology*. We are marking 25 years of the journal and, with the help of some 26 EPs, have selected eight previously published articles that are representative of the 25 years. As an editor it has been my most rewarding experience, and not simply because of the quantity of whisky we drank (we are citing Dr Laphroaig as a co-editor) whilst we read and discussed all those volumes. As we read, we repeatedly marvelled at the quality of the writing, the breadth and trends of topics, and the rigour of the research reported.

Having said all that, I believe there is much more that we can do. One of my favourite cartoons is of a notice board in a hotel lobby. A number of large men in overcoats are standing around the notice board, which reads, 'Welcome CIA', and one agent is commenting to another agent, 'One of the best conferences I've never been to.' It seems to me that if there is a huge gap in our professional literature, it concerns how infrequently everyday practices are written about. As some colleagues in Hampshire and I wrote about a couple of years ago in *Debate*, much of our work is as invisible as that CIA conference. We use many skills, experiences, and ways of knowing that come to be implicit in what we do. Intentionally or not, much of what Andy has written about has been concerned to make some of these everyday practices visible – and in my view, it is one of the most significant of his contributions to 'writing educational psychology'.

What's involved in writing?

At this point I want to make another brief excursion into another facet of writing. In essence, I see writing as a fundamentally ethical act. Writing involves taking a risk; it involves the courage to reveal something

about oneself and to hold it up for inspection by a reader. It also requires, I believe, that virtue of 'just generosity'; writing is producing something for a stranger and for most of us, we write because we want to: no one makes us, we don't get paid, frequently no one thanks us, and generally we wonder whether or not any one at all has read what we have written. Writing involves respect; respect for the material, respect for the words written down and crafted, respect for the reader. Although there is much more that could be said on this, it must be apparent by now that I find all these qualities, all these virtues, in Andy's writing; his is an authentic voice.

The Miller oeuvre

Andy has had work published across the last 30 years. His list of academic publications starts in 1978. For obvious reasons, I cannot run through everything that he has published but the scope of his writing has taken in: behaviour theory and management, paired reading, professional development, professional problem solving, applications of psychology to work with vulnerable children, understanding school systems and cultures, evidence informed practice, the application of grounded theory, and attribution theories and practices. There are common denominators. I have already mentioned two, his writing about everyday EP work and the integrity of his writing. A third, of course, is a commitment to explicating psychology's contribution to a whole range of matters that ultimately address the question, 'What can psychology do for me?'

Whilst it is not possible to refer to everything that Andy has written, I did want to pick out three publications in particular, not least because all three are brilliant examples of making the invisible visible.

First, the book that he and Phil Watts wrote: *Planning and managing effective professional development* (1990, published by

Longman). It is a book that I found useful at the time and still find relevant. This is because of the context from which they approach professional development. Changing times lead to changing needs; our role in an organisation or a service changes; job demands change... new knowledge and skills are required of us and we have a responsibility for acquiring them. Oh, and the book is infused with that most prized of qualities in our profession – curiosity.

The second is Andy's 2003 book, published by the Open University, *Teachers, parents and classroom behaviour. A psychosocial approach*. It is the second version of a book that largely reports his doctoral research into successful examples of behaviour interventions. This also finds my perhaps unexpected link with Burt. As we know, amongst Burt's many interests was an interest in what were then called 'juvenile delinquents' and what has always been known as misbehaviour. Andy acknowledges what an 'untidy and controversial' subject this is before, amongst other things, drawing out a detailed account of the day-to-day practices of some EPs as they collaborate with others to make a difference for a child. Not least, by considering the reciprocal interaction of children, parents and teachers concerning behaviour, he achieves what a lot of other writers and researchers on this subject don't do.

Finally, I want to mention a non-academic book, from 1988, *Hanging in the balance* (Amcott Press), a small collection of prose and poetry. In particular, I want to draw attention to a short piece, 'The local climbing club is 10 years old.' It strikes me that one can read this and in it read so many of Andy's qualities: his own sense of celebration, ritual and tradition; his sense of humour; his commitment to inclusive practices; and his valuing of the role of memory. In his account of the local climbing club and its 10-year anniversary, we are taken into the memories, drawn in by the narrative and, actually, we were there. That's good writing.

Conclusions

I have two conclusions. What I have been aiming to celebrate about Andy is the extent to which he upholds a scientist-practitioner tradition and in that, a tradition of writing. For me he provides an authentic, ethically confident voice, and he uses it to good effect to write about what affects EPs and those with whom we work. Almost finally, there is no doubt as to his dedication to the cause of spreading the word and as such for anyone who is just starting out as an EP or plucking up the courage to write, he provides all the inspiration that is needed to 'start spreading' your news.

So, for anyone who even only remotely knows Andy, the second conclusion, and the final words cannot be his or mine – they can only be Bob Dylan's:

'...May your hands be always busy
May your feet always be swift
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift
May your heart always be joyful
May your song always be sung
May you stay forever young
Forever young, forever young
May you stay forever young.'

A full list of Andy's academic publications can be found at:

www.psychology.nottingham.ac.uk/staff/am/list_of_publications.html

Upon request, I will be happy to send a copy of the PowerPoint presentation that accompanied this talk.

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