

"What to Do? Case Studies for Teachers (2nd edition)" (William Hare and John Portelli)

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[See table of contents](#)

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Book Reviews

William Hare and John Portelli. What To Do? Case Studies for Teachers (Second Edition). Halifax: Edphil Books, 1998

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William Hare and John Portelli have reworked the “intelligent, accessible and useful little book” (Court, 1994) they first published in 1993. It engages education students into the philosophical analysis of the problematics of practice. Many changes have been made in this second edition. The preface has been revised and Portelli’s first chapter, “Philosophy and Teacher Education” has been reworked. The number and breadth of cases offered has been increased from 24 to 35. As well, there are more contributors of case studies. Chapter Four replaces an analysis of students’ reactions to the discussion-case study approach with suggested readings to accompany the cases which are organized thematically around such topics as standards, assessment and evaluation, racism and sexism, censorship, teachers’ and students’ identities, authority, and the justification of the curriculum. Most importantly, this new edition consciously argues against any divide between theory and practice.

In the second edition, as elsewhere (Portelli, 1994), Portelli addressed the familiar binarism that separates theory from practice (Clandinin, 1995). He also argues against the dominant discourse of technical rationalism in education. Quoting Gramsci, he desires a philosophical stance that sees teaching and teacher education as a critical practice (Hare and Portelli, 1998: 13).

This is a clear evoking of Schon’s *The Reflective Practitioner* (1993). In his classic analysis of the “crisis in legitimacy” of practice, Schon argued for an “epistemology of practice” that utilized “well-formed instructional problems” not given but constructed from messy problematic situations” (Schon, 47). In the dialogue of theory and practice, “theory lets us name the problem” (Schon, 40). And, as Hare notes, case studies are “an excellent forum for student teachers to gain a deeper and more critical understanding of the theories they encounter in educational courses and readings” (Hare and Portelli, 1998: 25).

In the preface, the authors define a case study “as a story or narrative of an incident or of a series of incidents in a teaching context that raises problems of, for example, a pedagogical or ethical or political nature, or a combination of all of these” (Hare and Portelli, 1998, v). As I do, the authors take some issue with Court’s review of the case studies in the first edition. She states that the book is helpful because “[b]eginning teachers are in need of thoughtful guidance as they struggle to learn the technique and methods and the norms of the school while remaining aligned to their own values” (Court, 43). In the preface, Hare and Portelli state that “a case study is not a moral or fable.” Nor are they “prescriptive, showing teachers a way to proceed” (Hare and Portelli, 1998, v). For me, case studies are invitations into dialogue and analysis rather than as guides for good practice.

I also question Court’s reading of the case studies as literary texts. She critiques those that do not “grip” her attention as a story and which do not evoke some “visceral” response (Court, 44). Court’s comment positions these case studies within a particular forum of literacy and within a particular stance

towards texts. A more critical stance would approach texts and literacy—including the stories we tell ourselves and the stories others tell us about our practice as teachers and teacher educators—in a different way.

As a part of my own research on literacy practices, I have collected classroom conflict stories which seem to typify disagreement between students and teachers about the value and nature of certain forms of literacies. These narratives relate how these conflicts can have unhappy consequences for their participants and show how these conflicts can be reframed, not as stories of conflict, but of resistance to dominant discourses in education.

Exploring my own personal and teaching history, and reviewing what others have written about their own engagement in literacy practices have helped me uncover my own beliefs and assumptions about literacy teaching and learning. Dominant notions about literacies mask and naturalized how the production and consumption of texts are social practices that are fully integrated into power relations. One way to deconstruct these relations is to examine the metaphors that we employ story our literacy practices. The metaphors and imagery we use when we share the stories of our practice when opened up help us to rewrite both the stories and ourselves in new ways. I believe the literacy stories I have studied are much like the case studies collected in this book. An analysis of the metaphors and imagery in these case studies could help our students and ourselves to deconstruct and revise our theory and practices.

Hare and Portelli's philosophical stance reveals for examination that which informs our practices as teachers and our reflection on our practices. As knowledge, it allows us to see the theoretical underpinnings of the particular stances toward literacies which inform practice. The critical literacies are being done in the context of research itself. As Hare remarks, "the problem is also problematic" (Hare and Portelli, 1998: 21).

Narrative has the ability to both demonstrate and analyze. Through our stories and conversations, we learn a language, and a technology that allows us to adopt a critical stance towards the underlying assumptions and constructions in our theories and practices as teachers/researchers. We learn that nothing is neutral or accidental. Such a stance makes us aware how we use language and how language shapes us. We become wary of how texts position and silence their makers and consumers.

In telling and critically reflecting on our stories, we enter into larger conversations. We invite ourselves into a community of interested listeners and readers who assist us to inform and challenge our narratives and understandings. They help us to confirm and make reliable the knowledge we are constructing. This is an ongoing dialogue, shifting back and forth through the whole process of inquiry-journeying to some provisional place before moving on. This is a "moving about" strategy that shifts from personal introspection to critical analysis that is highly aware of the contextual nature of power and knowledge (Trinh Minh-Ha, 1991).

The authors of *What To Do?* have again provided "an intelligent, accessible and useful little book" that opens for our students and ourselves a way into this conversation about theory and practice.

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When I began my graduate education in 1987, I was introduced to a group of writers/thinkers whose work continues to influence my own. Prior to that, names like Heidegger, Gadamer, Hegel, Husserl, Schutz, and Nietzsche meant little to me. The closest I had come to reading the German philosophers was the work of Herman Hesse in the sixties. Even in graduate school, I might not have been drawn to writers like these if it were not for some very good introductions. It was in classes with David Smith, Ted Aoki, and Max Van Manen that I began to encounter these voices from the past seriously. Entering a new field of writing/thinking (with its own challenging language, history and conceptual framework) is almost like meeting a stranger whom I might not be immediately drawn. If the writing is initially obscure, I must decide if the reading (and re-reading!) is worth the effort. However, as with the stranger, a good introduction makes all the difference. If a trusted friend introduces me to new people and extols their virtues, I make the extra effort to get to know them.

I use this metaphor of encountering strangers because it relates to what is, perhaps, a weakness in my own orientation toward reading. I seem to have a need to connect with a writer at a personal level in order for their thinking to become meaningful to me. I am often able to do this through reading interviews or biographical/autobiographical texts. Paulo Friere became much more accessible to me after reading Macedo's interview where Friere speaks of his pleasure in food, wine, and conversation with his friends and loved ones (Friere & Macedo, 1985). Alfred Schutz became more real to me after reading things he had written about his music and his somewhat tongue-in-cheek phenomenological reference to sexual intercourse as a "face-to-face" relationship (Schutz, 1970). It was not until I read some of Heidegger's reflections on the poet, and sensed his envy of the poet's ability to speak the unspeakable, that I began to relate to him as a fellow human being (Heidegger, 1959).

And so it was with great interest that I accepted the opportunity to review the new edition of Nietzsche's collected aphorisms entitled *Human All Too*