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‘If someone discovers these gentle pot-stirrings…’: An Interview with Nesta Devine

PESA Editorial Interview Series – Women in Leadership

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Nesta Devine is Professor at the Auckland University of Technology and served as the third woman President of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia from 2009-2011. She completed her bachelor’s degree from the University of Otago and received her PhD, on the topic of public choice theory and education, from the University of Auckland. She taught in schools in New Zealand for 25 years and at the University of Waikato before joining the Auckland University of Technology. A leading figure in philosophy of education, Nesta has published in a broad range of areas with notable work in the areas of neoliberalism and education policy, the aims of education, and education for equality and equity. She has been an important contributor to the Editor’s Collective based in the journal of Educational Philosophy and Theory and has also recently taken on the mantle of Editor-in-Chief of the journal ACCESS: Contemporary Issues in Education.

Nesta is known for her criticality as a scholar, which is coupled with her genuineness and warmth toward colleagues, whether junior or senior, and other academic initiates. Liz remembers fondly her first meeting Nesta at the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia Annual Conferences, when Liz was a new member and Nesta was the President. In contrast to the crisp, official academic demeanour sometimes seen at conferences and in higher education, Nesta is a gracious host at academic events, particularly adept in balancing the dual needs for levity and lightness in intellectual spaces, modelling critical engagement with interpersonal generosity.

In this interview as well, one can see the thoughtfulness and care behind Nesta’s words, which make her an exemplar for new scholars who might struggle to be so genuine, authentic, and grounded, while also clearly possessing expertise and intellectual and cultural authority. The interview also helps us better understand the important influence of different events on her life, and how they made her the scholar that she is today. We thank Nesta for her words, time, and participation in this project, the second in a series of interviews with women leaders in philosophy of education. The following interview has been lightly edited and reorganised after two rounds of back-and-forth questioning between Liz and Amy and Nesta.

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Liz and Amy: First we’d like to ask about your background. What did you want to do or be when you were growing up?

Nesta: I wanted to be a doctor! I think this was because a near neighbour of ours, when we lived in a rural, coastal village, was a doctor, and an extremely eccentric, interesting woman. Doctor Logan, I never did make doctorship through medicine, but I got there! But medicine was a totally unrealistic expectation in my circumstances – my parents had left school at 12 or so, and so from when I was about 13, I was on my own, scholastically, as it were. My science teacher dissuaded

me from further study in science on the grounds that 'you're good at languages, aren't you?', and I did not realise to what extent dropping science would limit my prospects. And there would never have been enough financial backing.

Liz and Amy: Did you experience any other kinds of social pressures, from family or peers?

Nesta: Well, first, my mother saying very definitely that I should take the Teacher Training award – I've forgotten what it was called, but it was a quite substantial weekly allowance that entailed bonding oneself to teach. She started paying her own mother all her weekly wages at 13, so she was actually very generous in allowing me to keep the allowance. I didn't see it like that at the time, of course. But when I started teaching, I found it far more intellectually challenging than I had expected, and – unexpectedly – I found that I enjoyed it.

My mother was very excited when I got my School Certificate, but after that took my academic success more or less for granted. It was almost embarrassing to her, socially, I think. My parents' main concern was that I didn't become educated into thinking I had joined the middle classes.

I married very young, and my husband was only prepared to support my further education if it cost nothing and there would be a financial payoff. So I was able to do papers while my children were young – at the time it was difficult for a young mother to go to work – but his patience wore thin. I finished my BA, my teacher education course, and an MA while I had one child, and I started on a Diploma in Education while I was working but couldn't finish it.

Once I was divorced, I almost immediately set my mind to figuring out how I could do a PhD! That was incredibly liberating, marvellously exciting. Here I must acknowledge the supporting efforts of my dog, Mollie, who had two sets of puppies to pay my fees.

Liz and Amy: How did you get into research in education?

Nesta: As far as 'how did I get into it' goes – I was a kind of printaholic as a child and young woman and read everything I could lay hands on – and my father, an autodidact, always had books and access to libraries. Because his interests were education and political economy, that's what I read. Along with a lot of classical literature and English novels.

I have never seen what I do as being 'research' so much as a combination of reading and obsession. I have never done a 'research methods' paper – Jim Marshall was thoroughly opposed to the idea – so I was spared any expectation of doing empirical research.

Liz and Amy: Speaking of Jim Marshall, who were your mentors and how did you find them?

Nesta: I came across Jim Marshall in a stage 2 Philosophy of Education paper and later in a stage 3 paper, in which there were three students initially, then only two – think of the economics of that! But he was the Dean and Head of School, so he could get away with it! Then Michael Peters – I was taking a paper in a degree called 'Educational Administration' which was essentially a leadership paper – and becoming more and more cynical about leadership. He talked about neoliberalism as a political theory, and I was hooked. Other mentors/friends are Liz

McKinley, who had already been in the university system 10 years before I joined it, and Sue Middleton, an immensely successful scholar and great friend.

Liz and Amy: What or who were other important initial influences on your thinking?

Nesta: My father, who was a socialist. All the people I read – from GB Shaw to Jane Austen – Ursula le Guin; Simone de Beauvoir; Jim Marshall introduced me to Foucault, Freire.

Liz and Amy: What is the one book you cannot live without and why?

Nesta: Ursula le Guin and *The Dispossessed.* Because it offers a bleak picture of a more equal society, but the bleakness is made bearable by the horrid corruption of the less equal, more competitive/capitalist society. It isn't a utopian utopia, but it is an ethical one. And if I am allowed two choices, Michel Foucault's *Power/Knowledge*.

Liz and Amy: How did you adapt, or move on from those ideas and theories as your thinking developed?

Nesta: Well, in a sense I never move on. They are there on the shelf of my mind, for when I need them. So, depending on what the problem is that I am thinking about, I can pick and mix from my collection. I suppose the more recent development is thinking about the posthuman, and the problems of the Anthropocene, and Pacific and Maori ways of thinking about the world and relative roles of all those we share the planet with.

Liz and Amy: Related to this, a great deal of your work has focused on diversity in New Zealand education. Over the course of your career, have these issues changed? What work still needs to be done?

Nesta: This kind of work is never done. Waves of immigration for instance will cause new needs and new opportunities for conceptual translators. One of the exciting elements of New Zealand academia has been the growing number and strength of Maori academics (in all fields, not just education)– a phenomenon that owes a great deal to Jim Marshall and to Graham and Linda Smith. Te Tiriti may be a good starting point, but it doesn't put flesh on the bones as it were. That has to be done by people working in the field. A multicultural country built on a bi-cultural base will always have a need for those who can see past their own cultural boundaries.

Liz and Amy: Now we'd like to ask you a few questions about your experience with philosophy of education and the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia (PESA). How did you discover philosophy of education? And PESA?

Nesta: I took philosophy at the tail end of my bachelor's degree, in Otago. I really loved it, particularly a paper on formal logic! So I was keen to sign up for a paper called 'Philosophy of Education' in the Diploma of Education in Auckland. That paper was taught by Jim Marshall, Colin Lankshear, and Elizabeth Freeman, whom we ought not to forget.

I guess being aware of PESA went along with being a student of Jim Marshall and Michael Peters. There was a conference in Auckland that I took part in, in 1999? A very significant one, as it was the first time that Maori philosophy had really been given acceptance both in the conference and later in the journal issue that published the papers. I still draw on those papers in my teaching. Then I remember going to a conference in Perth, hosted by the inimitable (Bruce and Felicity) Haynes… by then I was hooked. To have a real conversation around the basis of one of one's own papers – that was really exciting.

Liz and Amy: Did you feel like you belonged, at your first PESA conferences?

Nesta: The early conferences were very blokey – they seemed to be populated by large, grey-bearded Australian blokes, all called Bruce (some of the Bruces were actually New Zealanders, but to me they were indistinguishable). At one particularly small conference, held in a classroom block somewhere in Australia, there was a very real discussion over whether to disband the organisation. There were 12 attendees at that conference, 10 men, and Felicity and I were the two women. Part of the emotional undercurrent seemed to involve a question of what philosophy of education really was, and where 'truth' lay – the analytics versus the posties was how I saw it at the time, but I could be wrong, being very much on the outskirts of the organisation at that time. It was extremely disorganised. Part of the reason for the low enrolment may well be because the secretary forgot to add people to his list. It was Felicity who made me feel welcome. And the blokes were not unwelcoming.

Liz and Amy: You served as PESA President from 2009 to 2011. What did you gain from this leadership role that you did not expect to gain? In other words, what surprised you?

Nesta: I think I learnt I am not cut out to be the titular head of anything! My preferred role is as chair of a collegial Board, and I didn't play the upfront, ritual roles very well. But I learnt a good deal, particularly about publishing, as I supported Michael to negotiate a deal with various potential publishers for *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (*EPAT*). I also learnt how eager the blokes were to get the post, and to squeeze the woman intruder out! That was a real surprise.

Liz and Amy: What other major things happened in PESA while you led the organisation?

Nesta: I think the most important thing was trying to create a sense of hospitality for newcomers and strangers to our society, especially for women – enhancing an acceptance of diversity in presence and in theory. The society became visibly more diverse during my sojourn as president. The new publishing deal was another thing – we doubled the income. And a certain amount of problem-solving. We also set up the first PESA website. Peter Fitzsimons did the work on that. It was an important milestone.

Liz and Amy: How has your experience of PESA, and the organisation itself, transformed? Also, how do you think the organisation has changed since your term as PESA President?

Nesta: PESA has become larger, obviously, and more international. The conference has become very large. The conscious decision to become more international has paid dividends in membership, in attendance at conferences, and in writers for the journal. Yet, possibly something

has been lost too. There was a strong spirit of camaraderie in earlier days which is hard to maintain as an organisation expands. The Australian contingent, once so very strong, seems to have become overwhelmed by New Zealanders and others.

I think sadly that not all the people we welcomed into PESA have continued to feel welcome, and this is a work that should be ongoing. *PESA Agora* and *ACCESS* are great initiatives to help create a welcoming online presence for people who may not feel confident about writing immediately for *EPAT*. The sad fact that we have not been able to hold conferences for two and possibly three years highlights their importance as 'kanohi ki kanohi' opportunities for welcome, conversation, and the cultivation of ongoing relationships across institutions and across countries.

The Conference in Fiji organised by Professor Ruth Irwin in 2017 was a stunning success for our Pacific students, and our links with the Pacific should be reinforced. We do not have good representation from indigenous people in Australia, and should perhaps consider a conference in the Northern Territory. The peoples of the Pacific, including Maori and indigenous Australians, have long and proud philosophic traditions, which challenge some of the embedded assumptions of the European/Western traditions, and we should encourage the articulation of these.

EPAT itself seems to have gone from strength to strength. I'm happy for it to retain at least some of its original Australasian flavour, despite its international reach, because 'antipodean' thinking has its own advantages and peculiarities.

Liz and Amy: We'd like to shift now, to talk more generally about your experiences with and understanding of leadership. What does leadership mean to you?

Nesta: I'm very cynical about 'leadership': is it an attribute of persons or of situations? What is the dividing line between leading and bullying? To what extent is a leader identified by gender and height?

Having said that, the most stunning example of leadership in this country, Aotearoa New Zealand, comes from two quite slight people, a man and a woman who work in respectful collaboration to lead the country through the Covid-19 pandemic – Jacinda Ardern and Dr Ashley Bloomfield. Both are clearly educated, intellectually able, articulate people, who have got the administrative elements of the task well under control, but their x-factor, the charismatic element, is the ethical component in their execution of their respective tasks: they care. 'Leaders' I like are ones who can make me think: with whom I am in broad agreement on the underlying principles, but who are able to bring to the task an element of surprise derived from their expertise in their field.

Liz and Amy: You bring an important point about how valuable it is to have meaningful examples of leadership available. So, how would you describe your own leadership style? How has this changed over the years?

Nesta: It took me a long time to think of myself as any kind of leader: just as a grafter struggling to support a bunch of children. I couldn't get promoted within the school system until I was

nearly ready to leave it (I taught school for 25 years). The problem, I think, was not so much being female, as being a married mother: the assumptions were that I would not put heart and soul into the job and – quite explicitly – that men who were supporting families needed promotion more than I did. Divorce upended that scenario as so many others. But in the meantime I had acquired a reputation for plain speaking and critical insight – that reputation was more important to me than promotion, although I could have used the money! In the university context, my leadership has been intellectual – I don't want to be 'in charge' of people! But I do want to open up spaces and conversation which may enable others to do interesting and challenging work.

I've always thought my leadership role was that of pain in the arse: always the person in the staffroom or meeting who asked the difficult or outrageous or unsettling question. It's not a form of leadership which is generally rewarded by promotion to the front corridor, but its nonetheless an important – and dare I say it educative – role.

Over time I guess I started to realise that with a certain reputation or standing also came responsibility. I used that first to call out some of the men I worked with for misogynistic talk and behaviour, but also, I had the opportunity to develop a professional development programme, which put me into a different role with respect to other members of the staff of my school. I started to grow up, possibly!

Liz and Amy: Often women face different challenges than men in work, to be 'kind' and not 'bossy'; to do more service and administration rather than research and leadership; to be sociable but not aggressive. Were these challenges in your career?

Nesta: Yes, and I was always – stupidly – surprised when they became apparent. I really didn't adopt the conventional role, not because I didn't want to, but because I wasn't socialised into it, and didn't really know how – I thank my parents, my father particularly for that. I came into the university system already a very experienced teacher, so I guess I was less vulnerable than those who come into it as young women. And in terms of gender roles – I bow to no one in terms of rational argument, so it's really hard to write me off – or down – as irrational, or emotive.

What I did was to concentrate on my work as a teacher – and I took on the committee work the university offered as a work of pedagogy, rather than a work of administration. My point was that most of the people employed by a university actually know very little about education as a discipline, and yet they pontificate endlessly about it. I had a lot of fun with these committees, actually, but I don't suppose my mockery made me universally beloved. They were exasperating, of course, especially the men who would (apparently) ignore my observations and then repeat them as their own within 10 minutes – and be listened to. Yet, I hope, my work was not in vain!

My advice to budding women academics is:

- Publish, publish, publish. No one can argue with that evidence.
- After the first thesis supervision, which you need to get on the board, do not act as second supervisor to a man as first supervisor. You will find yourself doing all the work, and not being able to make crucial decisions. I know this is a crude generalisation, but it's a good rule of thumb.

- Avoid staff meetings, which are an invitation for you to exercise unwelcome critique.
- Build or join a support team in your workplace – Liz McKinley, Sue Middleton, Andrew Gibbons, Leon Benade, Georgina Stewart – kia ora koutou.
- Build a support system outside your university – PESA is a brilliant example. Michael Peters and Tony Brown and many others within the PESA complex have been great friends to me. When you are totally overlooked within your workplace it helps to know that others value your work!

Liz and Amy: How specifically did you maneuver challenges you mention above, and other unsaid expectations?

Nesta: I don't know that I did maneuver them; certainly, I didn't out-maneuver them. I was in the university a long time before I became a professor. Oddly, the Performance-Based Research Fund was good for me, because it drew attention to my published work, and to the quality of it – the high reputation of *EPAT* is a strong lever we have here. So, although the men on promotions committees were very ready to overlook me, the evidence rather forced their hands.

Liz and Amy: From what you said about your family and husband, it sounds like you had to make some hard choices in your life and career. Did you face challenges 'to have it all'?

Nesta: Ah, yes. One of my greatest supporters was my mother-in-law, who urged me not to give up on my education and career. When I went back to university after my first child there were very few early childhood centres, and I am grateful to the women at the University of Otago and the University of Auckland who set up creches in those places – without them, I could not have done what I did. But juggling kindergarten, creche, later school, and child-minders was always a fraught and demanding exercise. About which I could not complain because the fiction was that this was all about my 'choice'.

Liz and Amy: In your view, what obstacles that women face have been resolved? What are the most important problems do you think remain, and how might they be addressed?

Nesta: I don't think the 'obstacles' that women face will ever be resolved, but we can look at them differently. I would think of it much in the way I think of the stories told about Pacific and Maori children – the deficit, long brown tail stories. Women are only underachievers if you accept the parameters of men's lives as the markers of achievement. We have the potential to think the roles differently, and to demand recognition for the things we choose to do. Teaching, collaboration, communication might be more highly valued. The traditional recognition of the sole-authored paper for instance may not be the most congenial or productive way for women to write. I have written quite a lot in that form but have had a lot of fun writing editorials with my colleagues. And really, we shouldn't be ashamed of having fun: we live extraordinarily privileged lives, and sometimes I feel that moaning about our circumstances is almost insulting to other workers in less stimulating and rewarding fields.

It's difficult to do this kind of analysis without thinking of women as an essential category, and certainly I'm thinking here of people who are socialised as women, who do not have the

characteristic assumptions about their place in the academic world that people born as men usually do.

Liz and Amy: What advice would you have for women and others to develop the healthy boundaries necessary to support one's work?

Nesta: I don't think I can answer this question. What is healthy? Is it possible to be a successful academic without being at least to some extent, obsessive? Is the question about saying 'no' to more work? I have never really learnt to do that.

Liz and Amy: To put it another way, how do you decide what projects to devote your time and energy to? Has this process changed since the beginning of your career?

Nesta: At the beginning of my university career, I was employed not for my academic credentials, but for my pedagogic skills – as a teacher educator – and I was not expected to publish. I had a better understanding of the academic game, so I did publish, and I took on postgraduate teaching which was not required of me. It paid off.

I was encouraged to believe that one had to 'get' research projects, and I did take on a couple – but I found the format and expectations very constraining. Most commercial or competitive academic research in our field depends on a notion of empirical research that involves multiple interviews, and I developed a scepticism around phenomenology very early which was really not helpful to either planning or executing such research. So eventually I decided to give this form of sanctioned research a miss, and concentrate on doing my own reflective, more philosophically oriented work. There isn't much money in it, but there is more freedom, and less pressure. There is not much point in grant money anyway for an academic like me – I don't want to 'buy out' my teaching.

Liz and Amy: Can you speak more about this shift to more philosophical and reflective work? In what ways does it offer more freedom or space to explore?

Nesta: Well, I am not knocking empirical research – if and when it is founded upon a critical interrogation of the concepts that underpin it. Tony Brown for instance uses Lacan rather than Heidegger or Husserl, or the standard, rather unascribed 'phenomenology', as a foundation for his empirical research, and the results are quite different. In fact, just thinking about this raises a question: what would empirical research based on Levinas's phenomenology/ontology look like? But in general, I grew tired of the standard 15 interviews and the assumption that somehow 'truth' would emerge from them. Keynes' view, that 'common sense' simply reflects the theories of long-dead economists, was a precursor in my thinking to Foucault and Nietzsche and their views on 'genealogy': the idea that current discourse has a historical ancestry which it never quite disassembles. These ideas were crystallized for me by a forensic scientist who explained to a group of school students I was supervising that criminal forensics is based on two principles: that wherever a perpetrator goes, they will leave some kind of impression, be it only microscopic, and that wherever a perpetrator has been, they will take with them some kind of material evidence. This is true of concepts: wherever they have been, they carry the evidence, wherever they are found, they make an imprint. Language, ideas, concepts – these are the

vehicles for the researcher-detective in cultural forensics. And once you come to that point, then there really are no limits as to what you can engage in as a researcher.

Such an understanding carries with it the corollary that other communities may have developed concepts differently, and that opens the door to meaningful supervision of students who want to explore the histories and implications of quite substantially different understandings of the world, like those of Maori or Tonga or Samoa. I don't attempt this kind of work myself, but I am very enthusiastic about supporting it.

Liz and Amy: How do you develop your research interests and decide which questions to pursue? In other words, what is your personal process?

Nesta: The impetus has changed over the years. It used to be something that just made me cross, and I would want to explore the illogic of a commonly accepted position. Nowadays it tends to be because someone has asked for a paper, or to support my students. A lot of my writing now is done in collaboration with colleagues – as editorials or papers putting forward particular positions. But the spark is still usually an absurdity or perversion that arises from common expectations or regulations. In demonstrating that 'common sense' is not common to everyone, that in fact it is an ideological, culturally bounded position, I find that being in Aotearoa New Zealand, where we have multiple viewpoints available to us, is a great place to be.

My process is to take a current issue (not necessarily a political one) and look at how different philosophers might have engaged with that issue. A poststructuralist position allows me to utilise a number of theorists, because I don't have to subscribe to the absolute truth of any of them. So for instance, in an early paper I was engaging with the common idea that students have a kind of fixed identity, which can make them difficult to deal with. I hadn't read Deleuze and Guattari at the time (who would have given me a very strong argument) but I could bring Foucault and Vygotsky – not theorists who would seem to be natural playmates – to bear to try to convince teachers that in fact they could shape up 'identity', by their own behaviour.

Liz and Amy: What would you say is the major characteristic of your own work?

Nesta: One of my lecturers once described my work as 'acerbic' in style, and I'll accept that. I hope the reader picks up the odd joke.

Liz and Amy: One of the themes throughout your scholarship is an attentiveness to disrupting those assumptions, including pedagogical, social, political, and philosophical, that lead to educational inequities. In other words, there seems to be an invitation in your work to not take the status quo for granted. In a recent article, 'Professionalisation through Deprofessionalisation' (Devine, 2021), you remind readers to question how so-called important skills are determined in teacher education. How would you consider this now, especially given the educational disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Nesta: How kind of you to characterise my work in such a way. That is certainly my aim. Covid-19 has certainly disrupted the certainties that have permeated pedagogy for the last few years – that is to say, for millennia. Parents have been obliged to take on the role of teacher or

facilitator of learning, and that is no bad thing. Teachers have had to learn to instigate or inspire, rather than supervise – again, no bad thing. I don't go as far as Ranciere in believing that teachers are unnecessary, but I do think the role could be reconceptualised, and that allowing more initiative to students and families could be more productive – especially if we could rid ourselves of the economic constraints which still force parents to work absurdly long hours to support a self-destructive (and world-destructive) economic system. One of the things that has become apparent in lockdown is how important schools are in the social lives and socialisation of children. Schools – and teachers – also play an important role in the social lives of parents and siblings, and where they understand and capitalise on this in lockdown, they can create a sense of intimacy and involvement which will stand them in good stead when they emerge.

If Covid-19 has done nothing more than clarify the significance of the education system's custodial role, and revealed to parents the complexity of what teachers do, it has potentially been of great service to us.

Liz and Amy: Relatedly, what do you think are productive ways to maneuver between the constrictive instrumentalization present in neoliberal approaches to teacher education?

Nesta: Oh, this is a favourite question. I answered it, to some extent, in a paper I wrote for a Festschrift for Roger Dale, in response to a request from Eve Coxon (2020). In essence, I use the term Roger used or invented, in a paper written nearly 30 years ago: 'the irreducible minimum of pedagogic engagement'. That is to say, at bottom, strip away all the rules and regulations, curriculum, assessment, etc., etc., and what you have is a relationship between human beings. The quality of that relationship – the warmth, the humour, the shared aims – is what makes any kind of pedagogic relationship work, whether it is with infants or doctoral students, and in any kind of policy framework, neoliberal or otherwise. I used a number of different theorists to get to that point – ending with Levinas – but when you think about it, its completely obvious. The problem is to get teachers, administrators, policy makers to understand that the key to the craft is not key competencies, or lists of qualities of the ideal teacher, but being a genuine and ethical human being, who is able – morally, socially, culturally – to participate in that pedagogic engagement.

Liz and Amy: Given challenges we face in this contemporary moment; how do you navigate the world and your research as a philosopher of education?

Nesta: Philosophy of education is almost not optional for me: I can't think any other way. I understand 'education' in very broad terms, and thinking about anything within those terms is, in my view, a philosophical act. This, of course, can make me a very tedious person to be around! So I try not to bore people too much. At this moment I am very depressed about the future of the (human) world, let alone education or philosophy of education, and I find that very debilitating to my ability to work as a philosopher of education. But I expect that sooner or later optimism will kick in and I'll be back at it.

Liz and Amy: What would you say is the most pressing issue in philosophy of education today?

Nesta: The most pressing issue in philosophy of education today is resistance and replacement of the same instrumental pressures that have long dominated education – in the neoliberal world these have become more explicit perhaps, but they predate the 1980s. This instrumentalism has been exacerbated by the enthusiasm for and dependence on information technology, and the reductive notion of education as simply preparation for work. We need to resist these things, but we also need to consciously promote ideas that will replace them. This is why indigenous philosophies, and people like Levinas and Biesta are so important. This resistance-and-replacement is not just an ethical issue – it's a matter of the survival of the planet, because instrumentalism, the notion that education is only for one end, and that end is profit, is contributing to the destruction of our world.

Liz and Amy: In a (2019) EPAT article, you attend to critical readings of archives, with particular attention to what is missing from those archives. We're curious: how would you envision your own scholarly archive?

Nesta: Oh my goodness, you have read some stuff! That paper was in itself an attempt to de-archive myself, and seems to have worked – that and Derry Girls, which is a great antidote to any diasporic romanticization of Ireland. Apart from that, I'm not sure. Like Simone de Beauvoir I have not attempted the Great Philosophical Work – and I think this is fairly typical of women academics. I am always conscious that I have not had a really good education in philosophy, so I don't claim to start from that point. But I have been a practicing teacher, so I am always conscious of the sharp end, the classroom interface – which doesn't stop me getting into some fairly deep philosophic waters, because it is in those waters that our daily concepts swim, actually. I regard education as a major philosophic experiment: a daily testing ground of philosophic ideas, which is not to say that ideas which appear to founder are necessarily without merit – our conditioning by previous philosophic concepts often interferes with our ability to implement new ones.

As to archival considerations – in some ways the whole concept is alien to what I try to do: I try to challenge the official, to subvert the accepted, and archives are the registry of the official, the accepted history. I work within systems, stirring. I guess my happiest archival moment would be if someone a long time hence discovers these gentle pot-stirrings and takes heart in doing their own.

On the other hand, a more immediate hope I have is that I have supported my Maori and Pacific students and colleagues to articulate their own philosophical percepts, and bring them into the light, out of the archaeological archive and into use. Aotearoa is becoming a different, decolonized place: its future is vastly different, I hope and believe, from its past, and I would like to think I've played a modest part in supporting this different future.

Liz and Amy: More generally, how would you like to think your work will be used in the future?

Nesta: Since so much of it has been targeted at neoliberalism it would be nice to think it won't be used at all. I've tried to develop some ideas with regard to pedagogy which might last a little longer.

Liz and Amy: You mentioned the importance for you of supporting your Maori and Pacific students and colleagues to articulate their own views. One of the most valuable things, especially for younger scholars of diverse backgrounds, is to connect with mentors in the field, to help them navigate the unsaid expectations of academia. How do you understand this sort of work?

Nesta: I don't really see myself as mentoring – its an extension of friendship, really, to other scholars who might need a hand, or a sympathetic ear, or advice. I try to open up opportunities – in supervision, editing, teaching, examining. I find formal mentoring quite challenging – how many hours did you spend mentoring this week? But I can see it has a place, as my 'hand of friendship' is probably extended on a very eclectic basis. Mentoring is meaningful in my never-ending quest to support diversity in education, and to support those people who I think will also support diversity…. I'm a bit obsessive, I suppose.

Liz and Amy: What achievements or attitudes toward work and life are you proud of, looking back? And what is a problem or issue that you are still trying to solve?

Nesta: Oh dear, this is a problematic question, because those attitudes or achievements may not seem so positive from the point of view of others. But I'm proud of my achievements in education – a PhD, even a master's degree or bachelor's degree, is not a given to someone of my background or life history. I am proud that once I separated from my husband, I fairly quickly summed up my possibilities, and picked up my education again. I have always regarded myself as lazy – but I have achieved a fair amount for a lazy person. I am proud of my graduated students – all of them – and I have high hopes of their work in the world.

A recurrent problem for me is convincing myself that I have something worthwhile saying to say. What right have I to demand your attention? So I am still trying to solve this problem, which can become quite debilitating.

Liz and Amy: Well, when we reflect on your career, we don't think we could ever describe you as lazy, and we definitely think you have worthwhile things to say! And we are sure others will feel the same way and eager to read this interview. To wrap up, we are wondering if there are any special messages you would like to convey to readers of this interview, young scholars in the field, or other words of wisdom or things you wished we had asked. What advice do you have for men, women, and all colleagues in philosophy of education today?

Nesta: Enjoy life, eat well, sleep well, and get plenty of exercise! Because without those things you are not going to be involved in philosophy of education or anything else! Oh, and wear your mask.

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