

## Reply to Yonge-article\*

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**‘Zeitgeist’’, diversity of perspective and science:  
reply to George Yonge**

**Every now and then an article or a book or a chapter or even a thesis crosses your path that reminds you again why you work in academia, something that reminds you of the essence of academia, the heart of the scientific world. The article by George Yonge, titled “*n Onwaarskynlike onderneming: ‘n Ondersoek na die kritiek rakende fundamentele pedagogiek*” [An unlikely venture: Interrogating the criticism of fundamental pedagogics] is such an article.**

**Although the content of the article is an interesting approach to the history of curricula in teacher preparation at a South African University, it is especially the implicit aspects of the subject that Yonge touches that offer food for thought:  
To substantiate assertions  
To rise above the spirit of the times (Zeitgeist)**

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**To actively seek out diverse views  
To always dig deeper  
To question yourself.**

**In this article, Yonge reflects on his own development in exploring fundamental pedagogics, especially as found in the work of researchers in Pretoria during the seventies and eighties. He specifically outlines his search for theoretically based answers while teaching educational psychology to students in the USA. He explains the trajectory of his visit to Pretoria in 1980 and the drastic adjustment of his curriculum after returning to the USA. Especially the influence of Langeveld and the categorical structuring of the phenomenon of education as disclosed within the field of fundamental pedagogics are acknowledged. Shortcomings are pointed out. Touch points are highlighted. Moreover, the development of the field during the socio-political environment of the time is outlined. His own position as a Democrat (as defined within the current landscape of the USA) and being non-Christian are declared. He then questions the assertions regarding the association of fundamental pedagogics with the apartheid education of the time. Yonge's questioning of this is done by means of a longitudinal analysis of what delineates the development of fundamental pedagogics and discrepancies are pointed out. This also is done by pointing out**

**misinterpretations, especially inadequate insight into the use of ‘bracketing’ in phenomenology, and selectively ignoring certain core categories in fundamental pedagogics.**

**This article by Yonge made me sit up, so to speak. As a student in the eighties and early nineties, I had to master the basic structures of fundamental pedagogics for many tests and examinations in various modules. The textbooks were thick. Theoretical concepts such as “Dasein” (being-there/being-present), “Mitsein” (being-together) and “Aha Erlebnis” (the moment of insight), were echoed in my practical teaching learning experiences as a young student. At the same time, it also was a time of critical, systemic self-examination in the country, modifying curricula in all subjects, radical shifts in educational policy. The spirit of the times was exciting and the opportunity for large-scale changes in the educational system was almost never-ending. The textbooks on my bookshelf and the study notes in my files expanded to include Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, Margaret Bancroft, Maria Montessori, Reuven Feuerstein and Lev Vygotsky.**

**However, it was not just the memories of my own studies that made me wonder after reading Yonge’s article. I also wondered about the times when assertions were made, and they were simply**

accepted without empirically examining them. “On what do you base your statement?”, “What are your sources?”, “Does what is said here match?” – these are the basic questions covered in any orienting research methodology course.

Yonge questions a specific association between fundamental pedagogics and apartheid education decades after the assertion was made. He does this by pointing out the lack of empirical evidence for certain assumptions, and by pointing out contradictions. He does not hesitate to state his point of view even if it is independent of the spirit of the time in which it is stated. It is autonomous and not influenced by the (prevailing) views on the curriculum in a new democracy. It advocates the preservation of scientific inquiry and the cautious interplay with the symbiotic dynamics among dominant views of the time, theoretical diversity and curricula.

Diversity in perspectives is supposed to lie at the core of academia. Divergent views strengthen science, enhance the quality of dialogue and often provide enlightenment and clarification – especially if the errors of thought are pointed out in your own line of argument. It brings enrichment. In spite of the dominant ideologies of the time, diversity of perspective create the possibility for richer, more nuanced views. Also, it creates the possibility that views can be

**broadened, sharpened and, hopefully, also shifted. Implicit in Yonge's article is the assumption that as scientists we, even when we investigate what is totally reprehensible (meaning apartheid education), we still have a responsibility to protect diversity of perspective.**

**The impulse to dig deeper than the surface also is implicitly present in Yonge's article. However, the question that comes to mind when you first read the article is: "Why now?" After all, it involves events and views from thirty, forty even fifty years ago. Most contemporary students do not even know the term "fundamental pedagogics", and the lecturers or alumni who do recognize it have long since packed away their books or they remain idle on a bookshelf. And yet it still is a part of science and academia that at the time held a charm for me as a young student and later lecturer – the deeper dig. One can always dig deeper, always reflect on the history, and always revisit and reevaluate earlier views. We actually have a duty to do that and we still can learn so much from Heidegger and Husserl, often more than from the great spirits of our own time. We can and must also learn from each other so that we can think about what can be developed and sometimes determine all that *no* longer needs to be endorsed, how not to do it – as in the case of fundamental pedagogics. However, the cycle**

remains, because even this part (assertions about fundamental pedagogics) can also be revisited.

It seems that reading the Yonge article can trigger and activate various levels of awareness: criticism regarding an entire subject area that was readily accepted outright and not disputed? The mis-interpretation of core concepts that have not been questioned? Was it the spirit of the times? What circumstances made this possible? Almost involuntarily the question that also arises is what is happening in the moment, in some respects, perhaps similar to what happened to fundamental pedagogics decades ago? What aspects of teaching are ignored in the current spirit of the times?

Yonge makes a plea for caution, arguing that it is shortsighted to lose the theoretic of the entire segment of a subject. He points to the problematics of an unmotivated association, even while also being critical of particular theoretical assumptions within the field of fundamental pedagogics. He contextualizes his exploration of the field of fundamental pedagogics with reference to W. Luipen's *Existential phenomenology* and also Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* and he refers to connecting points with Gestalt psychology.

**Yonge says, “In 1974 I read a review of BF Nel’s *Fundamental orientation in psychological pedagogics* (published in April 1968 in Afrikaans as *Fundamentele orientering in die psigologiese pedgogiek* and was published in English in September 1973) in the *Journal of phenomenological psychology* and ordered the book from South Africa.” This was his first acquaintance with the phenomenological study of teacher preparation by the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. This resulted in an in-depth study of Landman, Nel, Pretorius, Sonnekus, Van Der Stoep and Louw, Van Niekerk and many others at Pretoria (Landman, et al., 1975; Nel, 1973; Pretorius, 1979; Sonnekus, 1968; Van der Stoep et al., 1973; Van der Stoep and Louw, 1979; Van Niekerk, 1982).**

**In his article, Yonge pertinently distinguishes between scientific and post-scientific. He suggests the importance of the spirit of the times (Zeitgeist) and he acknowledges the importance of the socio-political context within which science is conducted. But he specifically points out the distinction between what is used scientifically and what is then interpreted post-scientifically. And perhaps this is the most important contribution of the Yonge article as it illuminates the broad gray area between science and the popular views of the time; it indicates that, although related,**

science and “post-science” sometimes differ and should not be confused.

In this regard, in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn writes that truths often arise more readily from scientific errors of thought than from confusion, and that “even when the apparatus exists, novelty ordinarily emerges only for the man who, knowing with precision what he should expect, is able to recognize that something has gone wrong” (Kuhn, 2012:65).

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