

CEPaLS 21: While I was watching the Repair Shop

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UK television is replete with programmes where members of the public experience change and have this documented and recorded. A current favourite is the BBC programme [The Repair Shop](#).

This programme is normally broadcast around tea time (4pm-6pm) in 30 minute, 45 minute or 1 hour programmes on BBC 2, but recently has been elevated to main viewing time (8pm) on BBC 1. A group of core and guest experts use their professional knowledge and skills to restore an artefact that a member of the public brings in. These artefacts can be made out of wood, metal, porcelain, leather, and fabric, and can be clocks, musical instruments, toys, furniture, and a whole range of items that mean something to the family and evoke a story of a connection with childhood and a family member who is no longer with them.

Importantly the experts restore the object and hence reconnect the person/family with their memories and emotional recollections of people and times that have gone. The family can now pass on the artefact to forthcoming generations who can use it either in a practical sense and/or as a talking point within and external to the family. There is a sense in which not only is the artefact repaired but so is the person/family who has brought it and the story with them for 'repair' to the group of experts. What they do not see (until the programme is broadcast) is the way the expert takes apart the artefact, cleans, and fixes it, and then the owner returns there is a big reveal where they are reunited with the item and there is an emotional moment where their memories are confirmed by the visible changes. The experts are concerned not to directly restore the artefact to 'brand new', but to undertake sympathetic repairs and to listen to the owner regarding what they want to see happen and what they want to retain. New memories are created through this process, and the negative memories of a broken or damaged artifact are reworked into a positive change process.

The programme speaks to the viewer through a combination of nostalgia but is also political through the promotion of mending and preserving rather than throwing away. Hence the viewer has access to

the skills of the experts who show that even the seemingly impossible-to-repair item can be repaired and can be repaired to a high standard of aesthetics and utility. The experts who have long established careers and businesses have become stars through their expertise and the ability to literally do wonders with artefacts that look like they are unreparable.

In watching *The Repair Shop* I have been reminded of the [article](#) I wrote with [Pat Thomson](#) at Nottingham University about make-overs. We essentially focused on the type of make-overs where the person is in a dire situation and this is examined, named, and the solutions given and checked up on at a later stage. Notably we examined [What Not To Wear](#) as an example of the type of make-over that illuminated what was happening in the professional development of headteachers in England. Here the original presenters (Series 1-5) – [Trinny Woodhall](#) and [Susannah Constantine](#) – would choose someone who they could ‘make-over’ in public, and then they would demonstrate how their expertise had ‘saved’ the person from their bad taste, neglect and general lack of style. As I have watched *The Repair Shop* I have been asking myself about the similarities with Trinny and Susannah. There are some similarities in the two programmes: the expert who can fix; the member of the public who needs something to be fixed; the use of tension, emotion and the big reveal to demonstrate the change imperative and impact. But there are also major differences, and in thinking about this I recall the typology of makeovers we devised that in the end we did not use in the article, and this is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Types of Makeovers.

Person: physical change			
Self-control	Box 1 Examples include: Programmes about a person's life e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Simon Weston and Falklands War <input type="checkbox"/> Priory Clinic and 'drying out' <input type="checkbox"/> Desmond Wilcox and 'the boy David' story. 	Box 2 Examples include: Programmes where a person goes through a physical transformation e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Extreme Makeover <input type="checkbox"/> You are what you eat <input type="checkbox"/> Ten Years Younger 	Expert control
	Box 3 Examples include: Programme where a person is given the opportunity to reveal their skills/talents/failures e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Strictly Come Dancing <input type="checkbox"/> Mastermind <input type="checkbox"/> Who do you think you are? 	Box 4 Examples include: Programme where a person goes through a capabilities transformation e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Changing rooms <input type="checkbox"/> What not to wear <input type="checkbox"/> How clean is your house? 	
Person: capabilities change			

The horizontal axis represents the control that the person/place/thing has over the change i.e. at one end there is high self-control where a person controls the change through the living of their lives and/or responding to conditions in which they can display their talents/weaknesses; while at the other end an expert controls the change through determining the need, nature, extent and the process of the change. The vertical axis designates the focus for change i.e. physical appearance and health at one end (their attractiveness, weight, fitness and so on) and the person's capabilities (what they can and cannot do, and what they should and should not do) at the other.

Our argument in the article was that headteacher training was primarily located in Box 4 with some Box 2 and 3 elements, where the expertise was outside of the school and outside of the headteacher's experience and training so far. Heads were made over to become corporate leaders by experts who identified the problem with education, and then presented headteachers with the solution that would be checked up on annually through data production and league tables, by the market and by Ofsted regulation. In fact, what Box 2 illuminates is how the person is deemed to have wilfully produced a situation (through bad diet, lack of taste in shopping, poor hygiene, debt, no partner) where they have no option but to hand themselves over completely to someone who can fix them up. In Box 2 for example a person might be portrayed as overweight. The consequence of their obesity is that their health is in danger, and their bodies lack visual appeal either through fat or excess skin as a consequence of rapid weight loss. Here the expert forces them to diet, and/or have plastic surgery to their face, bodies and teeth. In education Box 2 thinking has been used to characterise professionals as failing in their professional health, and so they do not look the part, do not think appropriately, and do not achieve the required outcomes. They either have to change or lose their jobs. Box 4 is less brutal, where the person has their capabilities developed through training and information so that their clothes, makeup and grooming regime, their home, their garden, their relationships are improved. Hence Pat and I argued that this was what the National College for School Leadership in England was doing for and to the profession.

While the article was published in 2009 I can still see the dominance of this type of make-over, whereby professionals are required to be corporatised through training and to demonstrate corporatisation through how they present the self through their practice. Hence what I continue to witness is a

deprofessionalisation whereby the agency of the headteacher is highly structured by those who are deemed to be in the know about how to run a school within a privatising system. To use a common phrase: experts DO expertise TO the professional, but use seductive language and techniques to make it seem as if consent and interpretation are active in the process.

Watching *The Repair Shop* has enabled me to re-engage and see how Box 1 and 3 might be in play. Boxes 1 and 3 represent a physical and capabilities change where, on balance, the object is more like a subject because of the opportunities afforded to exercise control. People are invited to participate in ways that will reveal something about them that is beneficial to them and/or of interest to others.

Box 1 provides educative accounts through a 'documentary' where someone is followed over time as they change. In *The Repair Shop* the time taken to make the repair is concentrated into a short segment and the time after the repair goes unrecorded. The potential exists to follow the story beyond *The Repair Shop* to see how the immediate reaction plays out in real life experiences, and what this means for the relationship between expert and client. This alludes to how learning from an expert is context specific and relational in regard to how the person transcends the artefact, and gains in knowledge about the self and others. This is deep within the field of educational leadership whereby co-research between a professional researcher and researching professional enables the ethnography of professional learning to be subject to reflexive review and meaning making. The professional not only undergoes physical change through the aging process, but can also change in terms of stature and energy.

Box 3 illustrates that the person is not only able to recognise the interest (and/or entertainment value) in what they do either in everyday life or staged events, but also that they can somehow call the shots. There is a strong demonstration of agency of the person who enters into capabilities change, whereby self-control enables the demonstration of learning to be through the commitment of the person, and certainly how they make visible gains through participation. For example, *Who do you think you are?* (a celebrity genealogy programme) does not begin by assuming that people have to be humiliated in order to begin the change process (Boxes 2 and 4), but instead they engage with historical sources and ask questions about the family and events in ways that impact on espoused identity. Through participating in *The Repair Shop* programme, and by watching their artefact be mended as a TV viewer,

the individuals and family members are able to learn about themselves and others through the mediation of experts. The pedagogic process between the expert and the member of the public through an artefact is developmental for both, where the expert frequently talks about what they have learned through meeting people and engaging with the repair process.

For me, Box 3 has the most potential for developing productive approaches to learning, whereby the learner is active and in control, but inter-relates with an expert who not only deploys their skills but is also open to learning.

If you wish to reference this paper:

Gunter, H.M. (2021) *CEPaLS 21: While I was watching the Repair Shop*. Manchester: University of Manchester.