

Opening the theory box

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Abstract

The role of theory is keenly debated in education but there does not seem to be much focus on what exactly we mean when we say the word 'theory'. This paper is an attempt to start to understand what the construct 'theory' means to educational practitioners and, in doing so I offer three rhetorics of theory: 'Theory as Other', 'Theory as Guidance', and 'Theory as Personal Pedagogy'. This paper is not an attempt to qualify and quantify but an invitation to other practitioners to examine what the word 'theory' might mean to them.

Key words: rhetoric, theory, meaning, construct

Introduction

I have come to notice that many colleagues speak of 'theory' and expect me to know what they are talking about. They use the word to give substance to their subject; they use the word to give credence and kudos; they use the word because they think they should, and they use the word because others around them do so. There seems to be something alluring about 'theory' in education and it strikes me that 'theory' has managed to find itself occupying a (largely) unquestioned situation. Whilst some report that educational theories are seldom legitimated by evidence (Kennedy, 1997) 'theory' *per se* has managed to be elevated to such a level that not to use 'theory' is seen as an academic fault or weakness. This 'need' for 'theory' can be seen as akin to Gramsci's concept of hegemonic replacement (1971) or Foucault's writings on 'governmentality' (1979) where we have a system that is both self-contained and self-perpetuating.

In the world of education many 'key' terms are subject to debate. Foucault (1970) describes fluctuations in the way we consider 'knowledge'; Smeyers & Burbules (2006) problematise the notion of 'practice'; some question what 'education' is (Peters, 1973; Hinchliffe, 2001); others question what education is *for* (Tate, 1999; Freire, 1996), and the range of paradigms and practices within education means that the word 'theory' is just as difficult to qualify (Schlib, 1991; O'Connor, 1957). Yet practitioners seem to privilege theory in their everyday discourse. I hear discussions on the role of theory and on the application of theory but mostly I hear an unexamined word. The ubiquitous usage of the word 'theory' has left us with a term that many suppose to understand but few choose to analyse. Theory has been

positioned as to form the underpinnings to practice and this seems to have stopped us from examining how we use the word 'theory' and stopped us from examining if we all talking about the same thing when we use the word 'theory'.

In examining the literature we see that debate around 'theory' focuses on the *relationship* between theory and practice rather than on the construct 'theory' itself: theory cannot exist outside of practice (Carr, 2006); theory and practice are not opposites (Klein, 1992); there are discrepancies between theory and practice (Akazari, 2001), and just because theory and practice are not currently compatible does not mean they never will be (Bayles, 1966). This literature tends to accept the construct 'theory' as if we were all agreed to its meaning but to assume that 'theory' has a constant and agreed meaning disregards the way that words can change their meaning over time; ignores the situatedness of language, and negates inter- and intra-personal understanding. The broad and rarely challenged deference to theory should irritate practitioners as it goes against the questioning nature of education but, instead, the debate seems to focus on application rather than examination.

Wittgenstein (1953: 23) suggests that language can change its meaning according to its context and the 'game' being played, therefore the meaning of the word 'theory' in one set of circumstances is likely to be different to that applied in other areas of usage. In his analysis of private and public language, Wittgenstein (1953: 293) tells of two boys - each with a matchbox containing what he calls a 'beetle'. They agree never to look inside each other's matchbox and also agree that they both contain a beetle. In this analogy we see that the thing that is a 'beetle' is private to each boy but that the term only has meaning through its public use. It does not actually matter what is in the box and the word 'beetle' now means 'the thing inside the box'. In a similar way practitioners have created public language definitions of theory (their beetle) and no-one ever considers to open the box. This paper is my attempt to open the theory box and start to review its contents.

When we scrutinize 'theory' we find that it 'bears contradictory meanings and thus proves unstable' (Schlib, 1991: 91); therefore the word 'theory' can only be understood within a broad domain and have a general interpretation rather than an absolute and specific definition. The meaning of 'theory', in education, is not constant and for each form there will be counter-forms: some of which will assent and some of which will abrade. Here I argue that deliberation upon the variance in how 'theory' is regarded might lead to a better understanding of one's own position and in doing so I offer three discourses or rhetorics (Sutton-Smith, 2001) on 'theory'.

Perspectives on theory

Education is awash with 'theory' but it is not my wish to analyse the worth of any one theory but to consider the construct 'theory' in itself. In discussing 'theory' in education it is worth noting the broad range: there are theories that cover motivation, personality, cognition, creativity, memory, development, behaviour, perception and much more. Some theories conflict and some co-exist. Some theories are replaced or discredited and some, like Piaget's, continue to box above their weight (Thomas, 2007). Some theories purport to be 'Grand' and some suggest they are practical, tacit or specific. Kezar (2006) moves beyond considering the range of theory and suggests that there are three levels of theory (see Fig. 1):

Level of Theory	Universal Grand	or Middle Level	Local Level
<i>Examples</i>	<i>A broad phenomenon like culture or nature of man or learning; across all contexts and cases</i>	<i>A more focused phenomenon like critical thinking; relates to many different cases or contexts</i>	<i>Specific phenomenon such as critical thinking among first year students at college; relates to a specific case or context such as liberal arts colleges or a specific institution such as University of Washington</i>

Figure 1: Levels of theory (see Kezar, 2006: 292)

As well as the range and level of theory we might consider what uses theory might have. There is also much debate regarding how practitioners might consider their practice in relation to theory. For example, many teach without theory following the model of their own learning (Bathmaker & Avis, 2005); many practitioners ignore theory in preference to focusing on the needs of learners (Henson, 1987; Taylor, 2003), and many practitioners ignore 'new' guidance as they focus on maintaining the status quo (Brown, Stephen & Cope, 1999). And, whilst some may report that their practice is influenced by theory, Fung & Chow (2002) found that many practitioners say that they teach in one way but may actually teach in another way altogether. Honest, balanced self-review and analysis is difficult (Schön, 1992) and teachers' self-analysis of their strengths and weaknesses can also be affected by 'desirability' (Jegade & Taplin, 2000) therefore practitioners might 'desire' to think that they are using some theory when in fact there is little evidence of this. If practitioners can't be precise in their reflections on how they teach, how can they be precise about the theories they may claim to use?

If we stand back from the debate on the meaning of 'theory' we might consider there to be two positions of extreme regarding the construction of 'theory' within education: one that promotes the orthodoxy of theory and one that calls for the rejection of theory. Promoting the orthodoxy of theory involves embracing Universal theory and Middle theory and suggests that Local theory is developed from consideration of these. In this instance theory is general and broad and has the ability to lead practice (which is specific and narrow). In countering this, it is argued that since Universal and Middle theories are created apart from practice they are not of practice and are therefore not truly relevant. The first position on theory (the orthodoxy of theory) is, as would be expected, specific to certain theories as it would not be possible to argue for the orthodoxy of all theories. This position is based upon the scientific model and suggests that a theory (if correct) can be used by the practitioner and will lead to an expected outcome. In this regard a theory is either right or wrong and can

be tested. However, it is the second position that offers most scope for debate. In this second position the construct 'theory' itself is assessed and questions are raised as to its value and its role. It is argued that, if theory is developed at a Local level it is limited by, *inter alia*, context, practitioner, field, philosophy, paradigm and time. If this is the case then can we really call Local theory a theory?

In an effort to further understand how practitioners might consider the construct 'theory' I have constructed three rhetorics offering slightly different perspectives on how the term 'theory' is used. These rhetorics have been developed by relating Kezar's three levels of theory (2006) to key literature in this field. In this next section I examine Kezar's three levels of theory in relation to educational practice and consider how such theories relate to the form and discourse of practice.

Universal theory

Tyler (1969) suggests that organising principles, such as theory, are held to be part of the structure that should form education and looks for 'a theory of learning which helps to outline the nature of the learning process' (p. 41). In this instance the theory is created beforehand and then used to lead practitioner judgements. Tyler describes a pre-formulated theory that determines and organises practice where 'certain kinds of information and knowledge provide a more intelligent basis for applying the philosophy [of education]' (1969: 4). This is an example of Universal theory orchestrating through predefined and abstracted principles. This conception of theory is hoped to help us challenge what we have done in the past through prophetic enunciation.

Ball (1995) claims that theory is essential in offering new approaches; that the absence of theory leaves us open to 'unexamined, unreflexive preconceptions' (p.266) and argues that theory provides veracity to practice. Where Ball argues that the 'purpose of theory is to de-familiarise present practices' (p.266) practitioners might see this lack of familiarity as meaning that the theory is not relevant to their specific circumstances; therefore otherness becomes a barrier to its usage leading practitioners to reject it.

A challenge to the universality and orthodoxy of 'theory' comes from its claim of objectivity; since, if we consider theory from a phenomenological perspective, we find that the nature of being and understanding are not independently fixed ideas existing outside of the influence of humankind, but that 'reality', and the theories constructed within it, is a shared construction. Instead of the orthodoxy of theory we might consider that theory is intrinsically linked to the time and space of its creation. Universal theory tends to be abstract (Akazaki, 2001) with little relevance to practice (Mortimore, 1999) and is framed in a discourse of objectivity, separation and distance that fails to connect it to the practical, interpretative reality of practice. Somehow this disconnect seems to add to the allure of Universal theory and, despite its otherness and impracticality, practitioners seem to esteem its academic quality and rigour.

Middle theory

Middle theory hopes to offer practical guidance that is more specific and less detached than Universal theory. In this instance theory might give suggested outcomes or offer a 'rule of thumb' (Eisner, 1982). Practitioners might feel that such theory adds to their practice by offering them new approaches. Some theories may be considered to have been of some use at some times but since they are always dependent on time and place they are not truly transferable and therefore not truly useful. Pring (2004) discusses the issue of 'theory' being created apart from practice; examines different perspectives on this, and concludes by indicating that we must remove the divide between those who practice and those who think about practice. If researchers are not in tune with practitioners then it is no wonder that theory has little to offer practitioners since they tend to make sense of practice through reflection upon things that have occurred to them and spend time trying to maintain equilibrium in the classroom (Brown, Stephen & Cope, 1999).

Pring (2004) suggests that 'research on education' is different to 'educational research'. 'Research on education' involves a researcher, working outside the educational institution under study, describing or prescribing from an apparently impartial position. Since Pring holds that knowledge is a construction he must reject this view of educational theorising as it relies on objectivity and the idea that reality is an independently existing phenomenon. The second view of educational theory is that of 'educational research', this involves the practitioner (perhaps with guidance from the academic community) gaining a practical understanding of educational values through action, insight, research and practice (Elliott, 2006). Others faced with similar issues in regards to the educational research/educational practice debate have suggested more proactive solutions such as creating practice-based bases of knowledge (Dirkx, 2006) or working to lessen the divide between theorists and practitioners through addressing the perception that they are in opposition (Schlib, 1991).

Middle theory might help practitioners with certain aspects of practice at certain critical points but since such a theory does not claim universality its worth is always a matter for debate. This is the smörgåsbord notion of theory whereby practitioners are free to select and synthesize theories that concur with rather than contest existing epistemologies and ontologies. Practitioners' personal perspectives create practitioner theories where 'theory and practice are mutually constitutive aspects of one another' (Kemmis, in Carr, 1998: 15) and any new 'theory' is rejected if it cannot be adapted to support this established position. This consideration of theory as 'helpful' implies that no one guiding theoretical principle can offer clear direction on how to teach but that practitioners can adapt aspects of theory that work for them into their mode of practice.

Local theory

The contextuality and specificity of practice can lead to the creation of Local theory. In this instance practitioners draw upon their experiences and reflections and develop their own personal pedagogical perspective. Such a perspective does not hope to be universal or transferable; it is unlikely to be precisely formulated, and practitioners might not be able to verbalise it. Local theory may or may not be influenced by Universal or Middle theories either at a conscious or unconscious

level. Where Middle theory consists of blended exterior doctrine, Local theory allows for any form of influence.

A pressure can be felt in some areas of educational practice where concepts such as “Research informed Teaching” are held up to be of high regard. Here we have the situation where practice is supposed to be developed through the application of theoretical perspectives drawn from research. However, practitioners are mainly influenced by the practice of others around them (Cook-Sather & Yousens, 2007) and by reflection on the experience of their students (Koutselini & Persianis, 2000; Taylor, 2003) therefore ‘theory’ may only be considered worthy if it is perceived to be a practical pedagogic tool that can offer guidance, structure and expected outcomes.

Thomas (2007) suggests that the word ‘theory’ has a ubiquity of usage; calls for exactness in our understanding of what this term might actually mean, and seeks clear distinctions between words so that we may be better able to describe what we are actually doing but this clarity of usage is reliant on words having a fixed and known meaning so that they can be used in such purposeful ways. The trouble with this approach is that when a word is used ‘its meaning is whatever its author intends’ (Knapp & Michaels, 1987: 68). Wittgenstein (1953: §43) remarks that ‘the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer’ - therefore, the meaning of ‘theory’ is dependent upon its use, by its user. In this instance the word ‘theory’ is defined by its user, its use and its surroundings. However, for many practitioners the definition of ‘theory’ is never explicitly examined in this way – instead its application is considered.

Practitioners might reject the orthodoxy of ‘theory’ preferring to build and use their own models of practice. They might not give a name to their personal pedagogical perspective but they are developing their own (to use the word loosely) ‘theory’. Here, we see personal experience leading to a personal theory on practice – then, through experience, practitioners review and modify this to create their own practitioner theory that is later refined through reflection. External theories are part of this final reflective process but are only thought useful if they can support established pedagogies; therefore such theories are always likely to describe what practitioners are already doing.

Eisner (1982) argues that all theory is interpreted and, in creating Local theory, the role of Universal theory should not be negated. By interpreting ‘theory’ from their own perspective and adapting, adopting or rejecting what is appropriate then it is possible that an external theory may help create a new individual practitioner theory (Pring, 2004). This approach would not be one that shows deference to ‘theory’ but one that is more reflective, more personal and more liberated.

Three rhetorics of theory

In examining Kezar’s three levels of theory in relation to educational practice it is clear that neither Universal, Middle or Local theory is without debate and these three levels are in themselves abstractions from practice. To further understand how practitioners might consider the construct ‘theory’ I have drawn together the previous discussion and developed three rhetorics of theory offering slightly different perspectives on how the word ‘theory’ might be used educational discourse.

The first rhetoric

The first rhetoric of theory is 'Theory as Other'. This covers Universal theory and what that might be thought of as the 'ivory tower' perspective where academics discuss theory in the abstract (or near-abstract). This aspect seems unlikely to influence practitioners as they tend to see such abstraction as being other to their practice and of little actual worth.

Tyler argues that teachers must work from some theory of learning and a 'philosophy of education is necessary to guide in making these judgements' (1969: 4) but this argument is not reliant upon this 'theory' coming from external sources. I have never encountered a practitioner who could easily describe their practice as being unconditionally informed by behaviourism, constructivism, cognitivism, Marxism or any other *ism*. Indeed, I would be worried by any practitioner who might suggest so. This does not mean that theory is not connected with practice and practitioners might find comfort in the fact that their practice is related to some wider body of knowledge; however, the consoling nature of connectivity cannot be the aim of any theory. Ball (1995: 266) suggest that theory 'offers a language for challenge and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others' but do practitioners consider theory in this way? For practitioners, theory's 'destructive, disruptive and violent' potential seems more likely to stop them from finding use in it and led them to reject it. Where Ball argues that the 'purpose of theory is to de-familiarise present practices' (ibid) practitioners might see this lack of familiarity as meaning that the theory is not relevant to their specific circumstances. Here we see a rejection of the hypothesis that theory is a guiding principle and the otherness of theory leaves it to one side of practice.

Some practitioners might critique certain theories for not being appropriate for their learners and others will switch between theoretical approaches as the need arises. Practitioners might see theory as being 'trend-driven' - a view of theory as being more of the zeitgeist than of intrinsic worth. For these practitioners 'theory' is a name that they use to meet institutional requirements and to suit their current circumstances. Here we can see a correspondence to Carr's assertion that the 'practical influence of educational theory thus has ... everything to do with the rhetorical role that this mode of discourse is able to play in a particular educational context at a particular historical moment' (2006: 152).

'Theory as Other' refers to practitioners' 'image of theory as incomprehensible "jargon" that has nothing to do with their everyday problems' (Carr, 1998: 29) yet somehow manages to be held in high regard. This first rhetoric of theory tells of 'theory' having an unexamined supposed worth where its very existence offers legitimacy to practice and it must be venerated even if we don't know why and we don't quite know what to do with it.

The second rhetoric

The second rhetoric of theory is 'Theory as Guidance'. This rhetoric focuses on Middle theory and looks at how an individual might learn and/or how practitioners might support this. This could be thought of as 'text book theory' or 'training-day theory' where a theory is given a cursory once-over and its usefulness extracted. Where ivory tower theory might be thought of as 'heavy', this is theory-light. Theory-

light focuses on how practitioners and their students might actually teach and learn. Here we encounter notions of learning styles, teaching styles, developmental phases and skill acquisition (see, for example: Kolb, 1976; Honey and Mumford, 1986; Gardner, 1993; Maslow, 1943; Fitts and Posner, 1967; Atkinson and Shiffrin, 1968). 'Theory as Guidance' focuses on the pragmatic and is used in an unproblematised manner in an effort to give old dogs some new tricks.

Pring (2004) suggests that theory has failed to address the divide between the conceptual and the practical branches of teaching but this rhetoric bridges that gap and offers practitioners tools and functional mechanisms that hope to lead to practical improvement. The distance between educators and the originators of theory could lead to the misapplication or misuse of theory (Liston, Whitcomb and Borko, 2006) and like any 'theory' theory-light can be misapplied, misunderstood and corrupted (for an excellent illustration of this see Sharp, Bowker and Byrne, 2008).

Tyler suggests that education can be made effective through practitioners' application of organising principles and that 'for educational experiences to have a cumulative effect, they must be so organised as to reinforce each other' (1969: 83). We can see some of these principles at play as practitioners consider how theory helps structure teaching and learning but, as is likely, practitioners might consider theory after-the-fact, using theory as a reflective tool in order to justify or adjust personal practitioner pedagogies (Beck and Kosnik, 2001). Here we might also consider the importance of adapting aspects of 'theory' to suit practitioner concepts of how their particular subject area should be organised. This rhetoric leads to a position whereby practitioners are responsible for creating and/or adapting theories based on what they see to be the needs of actual practice.

In its most basic form this second rhetoric is a series of hints and tips for practice but, in its most bold form, it becomes dogmatic direction. Practitioners seem persuaded by the normative commitments of theory-light discourses and accept, internalise and believe them to be reliable, true and valid (Cherryholmes, 1985). This particular rhetoric of theory can be dramatically misunderstood and practitioners may find themselves blindly trusting such 'theory' in the belief that it might lead to improvement in practice. Here, practitioners seem indoctrinated by the pseudo-authority of such theory and the possibility of developing practice through such guidance but no educational theory that purports to be a framework for practice has ever been wholly successful (Carr, 2006) and practitioners are left chasing the theory-light chimera.

For Bruner the nature of a theory of instruction is prescriptive as it 'sets forth rules concerning the most effective way of achieving knowledge or skill' and normative as it 'sets up the criteria and states the conditions for meeting them' (1974: 40) and he sees this theory of instruction as taking account of the subject, the learner and the uniqueness of the teaching situation. This second rhetoric of theory supports this - as 'theory' is used as a means of arranging and assessing practice. In this regard the second rhetoric of theory speaks of functional direction though the simplification of conceptual thinking into a system of practitioner guidance related to the actual procedures of practice.

The third rhetoric

The third rhetoric of theory is 'Theory as Personal Pedagogy'. Here we find practitioners developing a Local, individual and often unexamined set of principles that guide day-to-day practice. This rhetoric highlights Wittgenstein's discussion on private/public language. Here practice is spoken of as if it is a coherent and shared concept, but in fact there is no one practitioner perspective on practice but many individual practitioner theories. This is an individual version of theory that comes from individual practice rather than one that is imposed upon it.

Thomas (2007) argues that the word 'theory' is misused and proposes alternatives to the word 'theory' and this rhetoric seems to most clearly fall under what Thomas called 'craft knowledge' in that practitioners mainly consider the practical aspects of their teaching rather than any abstract theoretical directives. Here we encounter a version of theory that is more commonly labelled approach, method, technique or procedure. This is the theory that is not called 'theory'. Although practitioners might not recognise that what they are doing relates to a theory they are likely to have some personal perspective that informs their practice. This could have been developed through study, experience and/or accident. Within this rhetoric we meet a version of theory that has been developed through practical activity and reflection upon it. For anyone involved in education it seems unlikely that they have not encountered some external theory and this may or may not have impacted upon these personal perspectives.

We might hear practitioners discussing practice as an instinctive procedure: a hands-on process that is not directly defined by theory but is built through experience. Even where/if practitioners report that a theory has had a strengthening effect upon their practice we might see this as them adopting a pseudoconcept where studied concepts are reformed through specific experiences (Cook et al., 2002) leaving the practitioner with an adapted form of theory that they then feel enhances an established pedagogy. For many practitioners the actual procedures of practice may be drawn from their own studies - where they teach as they were taught - and personal theories are 'validated by [their] practical consequences' (Pring, 2004: 167). In this regard it is practitioners' reflections on their teaching experience and their personal ideas of what constitutes good practice that allow them to review and develop their practice. Here we see personal experience leading to a personal theory on practice – then, through experience, practitioners review and modify this to create their own practitioner theory that is later refined through reflection. Within this rhetoric abstract theory is part of this final reflective process but only useful if it can support an established practitioner theory; therefore new 'theories' are always likely to describe what participants are already doing, otherwise they would be rejected as having nothing to do with practice.

The third rhetoric of theory embraces the notion of practitioners teaching according to their own set of internalised pedagogical 'rules' and assessing their own practice according to internalised (and often unexamined) criteria. Although practitioners might not be able to verbalise their own practitioner theories, it is clear that they are working from a perspective where their practice is developed through consideration of how their specific subject should be taught in the specific context that they find themselves working within. Practitioners might not necessarily call this perspective

'theory' but it is clear that they are *theorizing*. It is for this reason that I regard this third rhetoric of theory as the theory that is not called 'theory'.

Conclusion

In offering three rhetorics of theory I do not wish to suggest that all language should be defined or exact. I merely suggest that we should not leave unquestioned something that is apparently so significant. If practitioners do feel a need for theory then they might at least make it clear just what they are talking about! Elliott (1998) argues for reflective practice as an epistemology, where reflection can lead to change in practice and (possibly) a change to institutional policy. And whilst practitioners might reflect upon what they *do* they might also try considering reflecting upon what key aspects of their language might mean.

If practitioners can identify what they mean when they say the word 'theory' then they might be better able to meta-analyse their personal paradigms leading to practitioners being more sure-footed. And, hopefully, from sure-footed beginnings we will develop a practice that is reliable, analytical, valid, assertive and dynamic. Since I am interested that practitioners actually engage with practice and constantly strive to improve, I offer the following suggestion: when considering locating practice in theory, we first of all question what we consider 'theory' to be. It seems clear that 'theory' tends to stand in a place of high regard – conversely the word 'theory' is used in a broad and unexamined way. If practitioners do feel a need for 'theory' then they might at least make it clear just what they are talking about. I offer the three rhetorics of theory: 'Theory as Other'; 'Theory as Guidance', and 'Theory as Personal Pedagogy' as a starting point for such reflection - both at the philosophical and practical level. Philosophical debate on these rhetorics may involve practitioners arguing their construction; their justification; their purpose, and their academic rigour. Practical debate may involve practitioners attempting to apply such terms to their practice and perspective and testing their worth *in situ*.

The allure of 'theory' is false. Without analysis we are left with an empty unexamined singularity placed upon a pedestal. In this paper I have tried to set forth my thoughts on what 'theory' might actually mean. I have attempted to open the box and look inside at the thing that is called 'theory. The point of these rhetorics is not to try to close the debate on what 'theory' might be but attempt to show that I have considered what 'theory' means to me. I do not pretend that my three rhetorics offer a definitive typology but hope that other will be tempted to question my thoughts – then they too will have to look inside the theory box!

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