Article

RESEARCH *in* EDUCATION

Research in Education
0(0) 1–7
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DOI: 10.1177/0034523716664574
rie.sagepub.com

The theory gap in higher education

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Abstract

This essay makes the case that while theory plays a vital role in the context of disciplinary research and scholarship, it has had little meaningful impact on the discourses, policies, and practices of contemporary higher education. This lack of theoretical engagement is not value-neutral, but has had devastating consequences in terms of higher education's inability to resist neoliberal rationalities and conceptualize new possibilities for practice.

Keywords

higher education, theory practice relationship, epistemology, John Dewey

Several years ago, I conducted a major overhaul of my undergraduate course in schooling and social theory. My intention was to create a more integrated experience for students, such that the pedagogy would embody many of the theoretical concepts they encountered during the semester (e.g. student agency, democratic decision-making, experiential learning). The result was my first attempt at a truly collaborative syllabus in which students would participate in the construction of learning goals, contribute readings, and even co-construct assignments.

From the beginning, I faced a significant problem. The course needed to meet the general education requirements on my campus, which meant I had to pass the revision through the university curriculum committee. My anxiety regarding the committee was partially a result of proposing a course that included radically non-traditional pedagogical and evaluative elements, but also because I intentionally included no learning outcomes. My research was increasingly leading me to the conclusion that most assessment metrics imposed on college campuses – manifesting in the fetishization of learning outcomes – actually inhibit deep learning

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(see Stoller, 2015). My choice to exclude learning outcomes was not a result of pedagogical laziness, but a specific theoretical judgment borne out of professional expertise. If I was to teach a course on schooling that featured counter-narratives to the dominant discourses in education, then I felt compelled to design a course which embodied this set of values.

I consulted with several trusted senior faculty who encouraged me to simply play politics with the system. One suggested that 'everyone' develops two syllabuses: one for the bureaucrats and one for the students. Another more bluntly compared the situation to that of the Emperor's New Clothes, imploring me to simply go along with the expectation and not fret too much about it.

I decided instead to present the syllabus as written and, as I anticipated, it was not approved in its non-traditional format. Committee members expressed a range of responses to my justification. Some faculty agreed with my sentiment but felt as though I was naive to push back on the inevitability of the assessment requirements of the institution. The majority felt as though I was simply being obstinate. I was told repeatedly by colleagues from across the campus that learning outcomes and evaluative rubrics are not value-laden, but simply a tool to improve performance. From their perspective, I was not presenting a theoretically informed pedagogical alternative, but simply denying what is objectively true.

My experience begs a question that runs parallel to a charge given by Clarke et al. (2016) in their introduction to the re-visioned *Research in Education*. They write that this journal should be concerned 'with the *nature*, *role* and *status* of research in the field of education' (p.2, italics in original). My essay is an attempt to build on this concern by raising an issue which has largely remained dormant in higher education research and teaching. That issue is precisely the role that theory (broadly understood) plays in university practices.

While the continual development of theoretical frameworks and critical lenses is vital to the health of higher education, educational researchers should be as concerned with the ways in which theories are deployed (or resisted) within the context of our pedagogies and curricula, university policies, physical architectures, administrative and faculty governance structures, as well as in the context of student life. At stake in this essay is not the next theoretical horizon within the field of educational research. My concern is that the rich body of theory that already exists across a wide range of disciplines (including education) is virtually non-existent in the discourses and decision-making processes on many campuses. It is my contention that our campus practices largely operate in what might be called a *theory gap*. What I mean by this term is that most university practice is devoid of the kind of theoretical awareness, diversity, and engagement necessary to create and sustain meaningful action.

This claim is evidenced by the fact that although the makeup, outlook, and methods of disciplinary work have changed in revolutionary ways through the past century, our campuses largely comprised practices, infrastructures, and expectations that have been in place since the founding of universities in Europe. Ronald Barnett and Kelly Coate (2004) argue, for example, that there has been no

meaningful modern debate around the idea of curriculum in higher education. Instead, any talk of curriculum is framed exclusively within the context of teaching methods for content delivery (pp.13–17).

There are many influential bodies of theory that have fundamentally changed the way we understand social structures, cultural interchanges, and the way we inhabit our natural environment, yet they have virtually no seat at the table of university practice. For example, while post-structuralism has deeply impacted thinking across a wide range of disciplinary domains and is increasingly well developed within educational research (see Peters and Biesta, 2009; Biesta and Egéa-Kuehn, 2001) such critiques are largely absent in committee meetings that structure the everyday architecture of university policies. Other bodies of theory have made minor inroads into opening the discourse, but are most often domesticated by and translated into the dominant paradigm. For example, while the last 20 years have witnessed a major emphasis on women in the sciences, the direction of this effort has been almost exclusively on outreach efforts that encourage women to enter these majors and fields (see Milgram, 2011). The robust feminist critiques of the curricular architectures and pedagogical practices of the fields into which these young women are being pushed are undermined or ignored on many campuses (see Eschenbach et al., 2005).

The idea of a theory gap does not imply that educational practice is devoid of theory – after all, all practices are built on some set of theoretical underpinnings. The question instead is whether the limited set of theories driving practice is transparent and therefore open to critique and reconstruction. The justification I put forward to my campus curriculum committee, for example, attempted to make transparent the fact that the evaluative demands of the institution are not an objective and universal framework for practice, but instead are the conclusions of a specific subset of educational psychology with the work of E.L. Thorndike at its source (Garrison 1990: 393–394). Yet the committee reviewing my syllabus remained attached to a kind of outmoded objectivism that I suspect (quite ironically) would not be well received in the context of their own disciplinary work.

It is imperative to the health of our institutions that educational researchers confront the question of why the very same campuses that sustain and support deeply engaged theoretical activity in the context of a discipline are themselves devoid of meaningful theoretical engagement regarding their own policies and practices.

There are a number of structural elements in university life that might explain why this situation exists. One immediate issue is the balkanization on most campuses that occurs as a result of the radical specialization of disciplines and administrative responsibilities. In this context, faculty understand their role as being little more than disciplinary contractors with their primary commitment being inquiry within their chosen field of research. In the U.S., student affairs (i.e. student services) professionals constitute as large a body as faculty on most campuses and are almost universally disconnected from the academic mission of the institution.

University administrators are thrust into quasi-business and management roles for which they have little support and typically no training.

I believe the current landscape of practice is derived at least in part from a particular set of epistemological assumptions which underpin our educational and disciplinary work. Our campuses and disciplinary architectures are largely designed under a powerful if not unacknowledged commitment to what John Dewey labeled the Spectator Theory of Knowledge or what in classic epistemological terms is labeled Ksp (S knows that p) (see Boyles 2006; Stoller, 2014). This rationality, which I call SP thinking, is committed to a Substance Realist metaphysics in which the knowable world comprised those things which are both empirically available and quantitatively measurable. Knowledge is understood as equivalent to abstract and foundational principles which correspond to this measurable reality (i.e. the correspondence theory of truth) and which may be manipulated technologically to yield prediction, stability, and control.

This epistemic theory births the myth that colleges and universities exist exclusively for the purposes of the creation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge. Institutions are charged with both the creation (disciplinary labor) and distribution (pedagogical labor) of knowledge, when knowledge is understood as objective data, facts, or generalizable information. Departments and curricula are arranged in terms of what is considered to be the logical division of data (e.g. subjects and disciplines). Teaching is viewed as the act of data transmission: a kind of telling which occurs between the knowledgeable and the ignorant. Students exist as data-absorbing *tabula rasas* who will be certified as competent users of knowledge after successfully passing a series of pre-designed, logically ordered courses. Individual capacity and growth are imagined as a student's ability to cognitively absorb, retain, and reproduce that which outside agents have deemed both necessary and true.

There are two significant consequences of this mythos. The first consequence is that it establishes a nearly intractable set of dualisms in the university's conceptual architecture, which radiate out from the assumption that knowledge lies outside experience. It is this epistemic belief that separates the knowledgeable (faculty) from the ignorant (students); cognition from emotion; outcomes from the processes of inquiry; curricula from student life; disciplines from one another; and academic from residential space. SP thinking is so pervasive on most campuses it is almost impossible to imagine alternative possibilities for practice.

But SP thinking goes further: not only does it undergird and dictate the conceptual architecture of our practice, but it also influences the way in which we interact with that architecture. The second consequence of SP thinking is that *theory* is viewed as unnecessary to practice because the whole of educational practice is conceptualized as the simple transmission of stable information between nodes on a network. Disciplines are viewed as those practices which deploy theory in order to discover and produce stable knowledge, while pedagogy, curricula, and other university activities are little more than the vacuous space where knowledge (i.e. facts, data) is stored and disseminated. The shift between

disciplinary knowledge worker to teacher–administrator is subsequently viewed as a shift from a theoretically grounded investigator to an atheoretical practitioner.

There are significant and troubling ways in which this lack of theoretical engagement in practice manifests itself in the ongoing life of our campuses.

One major impact is that lack of theory submerges thinking. When thinking exists strictly at the level of practice the result is the development and maintenance of programs, policies, and systems that are built on a kind of practical eclecticism (i.e. best practices) with little or no consideration of how or why particular approaches are adopted. Further, this mode of operating offers no ability to sort practices which enrich education from those that are antithetical to it.

Another impact is that it narrows thinking. Many aspects of higher education practice are derived from narrow theoretical currents, yet those same currents quickly come to dominate the whole of a particular field of action without being open to alternative imaginaries or critique. My own experience provides one example of the way in which one sub-current in educational psychology has come to dominate the entire pedagogical imaginary of many colleges and universities. There undoubtedly others, such as the way administrative practices are increasingly driven by total quality management (TQM) principles (see Lawrence and Sharma, 2002). Practice is always built on theory, but when theory is assumed rather than reflected upon the result is little more than mindless, ideological practice.

This lack of theoretical engagement has also left our institutions vulnerable to outside imaginaries co-opting our practices. Most of my faculty colleagues can do little more than intuit a problem with the contemporary assessment movement, but they have neither the conceptual resources to explain why it is problematic, nor the linguistic resources to offer counter-narratives that contradict its assumptions and effects. When we fail to come to critical consciousness about our theoretical orientations, we can do little more than assume the status quo.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, lack of theoretical engagement reduces our ability to deeply problematize practice. Most of our institutional practices (e.g. the semester system, the tenure and promotion process, discipline-based majors) are assumed to be both objective and inevitable. Without engagement in theoretical discourse, we restrict our ability to think beyond practice to construct new educational imaginaries. Theory opens up new conceptual possibilities for practice that would have previously been unthinkable.

While it would be satisfying to move beyond problematization to now draw a conclusion that would offer a path forward, I am regrettably unable to do so. Perhaps this is rather the point. Education is complex, challenging, and not given to tidy solutions. It is therefore imperative that we catalyze, rather than reduce, the heterogeneity of the discourse and allow theory to do its work.

Dewey (1927/1984) famously remarked that the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy (p.327). I believe the same sentiment holds here: what we need is a more diverse and more deeply engaged theoretical discourse that directly engages with educational practice. How might this happen within an institutional

framework designed to fragment discourse and turn faculty attention exclusively toward disciplinary work? Perhaps a first step is simply building a stronger sense of the public within our faculty and staff communities as a way of opening up lines of critical engagement with ideas. While not every faculty member across every discipline can (or wishes) to become a full-scale educational theorist, it is also not enough to assume that educational and pedagogical practices do not require some degree of meaningful theoretical engagement. We must begin to bring our disciplinary resources (however eclectic or distant) to bear on the very practices which constitute a large portion of our working life. In fact, educational theory itself would be enriched by a wider and more eclectic range of disciplinary engagements.

In my estimation the university is increasingly being seduced and co-opted by a kind of technocratic and utilitarian rationality. We have allowed this to happen in part because the architecture of our lives as scholars has kept theory away from the domain of our university practices as teachers and administrators. As Dewey (1924/1983) argues, "...a high degree of intellectual freedom in a narrow and technical line is in effect a restriction of intellectual freedom" (p.208). Unless there is some intervention made, technocratic logic will continue to erode our institutions as democratic spaces. It will eventually deprofessionalize our fields and transform the university into a domesticated resource serving an economic production function.

While most of our campuses increasingly face spatial, human, and financial resource issues, this is not our area of greatest need. The major resource we lack is theoretical. We have failed to develop and deploy adequate languages and imaginaries that will lead us toward a meaningful future for educational practice.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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