Book Review

**Education and theory: strangers in paradigms**
Gary Thomas, 2007
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Should educational theory guide educational practice? Indeed, is this a realisable goal? What if it were claimed that theory, far from being an explanatory or predictive device for improvement, is no more than retrospective generalisation culled from practice? What if it were claimed that educational theory is no more than a chimera, its advocates’ quest betraying an unrealisable ambition for epistemological certainty? And what if we were led to conclude that not only is a commitment to theory misguided but that its pursuance has conservative effects, hindering educational advance? In relegating practice to a search for theory, what if educationists have lost sight of the potential of more productive forms of inquiry and of the veracity of practitioner judgement? This, and more, is provocatively and persuasively argued in this compelling new book.

Much of the author’s argument hinges on the definition of ‘theory’; Thomas devotes considerable space to the term’s etymology as it has appeared in the natural and social sciences. Given its tendency to befall promiscuous usage, he is careful to distinguish the object of his attack from rigorous intellectual endeavour. There is also an historical overview of how theory came to be imported into education. This draws upon the renowned, longstanding rift in the social sciences between the constructivist view - wherein scientific method and theory are viewed as culturally embedded - and the view of those cleaving to an objective standpoint and who counsel the application of scientific method to social inquiry. Thomas offers a cogent argument against the latter; the possibility of finding regular empirical laws or Popperian falsifiable theory in social inquiry is disavowed and examples of how putative ‘education theory’ can distort practice are given in support of his case. Thomas shows how, in an attempt to borrow epistemological legitimacy and cachet from natural science, educational theorists have not only continued to revere the fallacious but have misrepresented reflective practice by calling it personal ‘theory’.

A theme which permeates the book is educational theorists’ neglect of knowing which is irreducible to propositional knowledge, or what we might call ‘practical know-how’. Given that only a fraction of our perceptual engagement with the world is given discursive form, Thomas shows how the declarative is in fact the tip of the iceberg, and how vital is a background of tacit understandings in rendering foregrounded propositions intelligible. The potency of Thomas’ argument becomes apparent here. The value of intuition, hunches and insider-based knowing becomes evident. Standing aside one’s ‘theory’ in order to test it against experience becomes implausible. For if what are described as theory are actually
rules-of-thumb founded upon a practitioner’s recognition of familial resemblance between prior cases, then practitioner judgement in dealing with the contextual peculiarities of a problem at hand is vastly superior to any purported ‘theory’. Thomas calls practitioner understandings “fallible intellectual constructions” which he claims are no more than “tentative hopping-off points” rather than “solid rock”. Moreover, he shows how their fallibility is a strength not an infirmity. Each new situation a practitioner recognises as a variant of a more general problematic is novel enough to contribute something that transforms their understanding. This is an iterative process then, which has creativity at the heart of practitioner inquiry – and educational progress.

Thomas is thus able to construct a formidable argument against the tyranny of ‘correct’ method and methodology in educational inquiry. Even the darling of interpretive inquiry – grounded theory – is shown to be contaminated with positivist assumptions in its tendency to circumscribe thought within the boundaries of the status-quo. Thomas argues instead for inquiry which proceeds more through “bricolage” and analogical thinking than the inductive and deductive thinking so beloved of theorists. Apologists for educational theory may here lament the loss of transferability. But qualitative inquiry, Thomas argues, should never regret its particularity for herein lies its fecundity and illuminative capacity for expanding understanding. Rather than trying to fit experience into a preconceived theoretical lens, educational researchers and practitioners may be at liberty to innovate. Such inquiry is ably demonstrated through examples given in the final chapter.

Whatever your views on theory, I believe this book to be essential reading for all working in the field of education. The book is extensive in scholarship and Thomas is at pains to point out the rich heritage underlying his ideas. His sources are contemporary and ancient, and straddle disciplinary boundaries. Readers may find some ideas familiar; the attempt for example to escape the suffocating effects of Cartesian representational epistemology is a persistent theme in the writings of those who have taken the antifoundational turn. What is, in my view, unique is that Thomas penetrates to this philosophical depth in such a way as to bring into stark relief its far-reaching implications, to reveal just how far off-track much educational thinking is. Not only that, the prose is refreshingly engaging and stunningly crafted. It is witty and erudite; the illustrative use of anecdote and allegory is illuminative and entertaining. This is an imaginative and ambitious book which seeks to go beyond what is. At a time when the very meaning and purpose of education is in question, this is a very important book indeed.

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