



The Shapes of Theory in Education

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EDITORIAL

The Shapes of Theory in Education

When the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle: only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life' <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~Johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm>.

The first and second waves of educational theory were *philosophical*, contained in the ancient texts of classical Greek and Roman societies in the first instance and then in the Enlightenment texts of the early moderns. In these texts there was clearly a concern not only in relation to learning but also in relation to citizenship and participation in the *polis*. These waves happened before the great diversification of knowledge and the formation of the disciplines during the eighteenth century, although it is also the case that education traditionally figured alongside philosophy and politics. Only with the Scottish Enlightenment was there a separation of economics and politics from natural or moral philosophy, around the time of Hutcheson and Adam Smith and the consequent beginning of liberal political economy. In some ways it could be argued that educational theory has never escaped the ethical, political and epistemological orientations laid down in this history of the disciplines.

The third wave consisted in *early experimental psychology*, which found its origins in the nineteenth century that saw Wundt, Bell, Fechner, the Wurzburg school and C. S. Peirce embrace a new and developing scientificity in relation to questions of methodology, reliability, and validity. Educational psychology began to flourish and with its growth came the burgeoning fields of *cognitivism*, *behaviourism*, *constructivism* and *connectionism* that determined the prevalent approach to so-called *learning theory*. As an offshoot of this work, educational psychology also contributed to instructional design and educational technology which, between them, increasingly define *instructional theory*.

In part, these developments were driven by the growing influence of different forms of *empiricism* that emphasized experience and evidence, especially experimental science, which is based on the senses and historically often associated with Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century and with Thomas Hobbes and Spinoza in the eighteenth. Later David Hume, John Locke and John Mill helped to establish what became known as 'scientific method'.

Democratic education, with its ancient origins as a theory of democracy as both the goal and means of inquiry constitutes the fourth wave and became established soon

after Dewey published his *Democracy and Education* (1916), in which he argues that education and learning are fundamentally social and interactive processes. Modern democratic education can be traced to the Enlightenment and in particular to Locke's work and that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, representing the two main versions of European political thought. Allied to the theory of democratic education are revivals of *citizenship theory* in education that emphasize *multiculturalism* and *cosmopolitanism* and also aid studies of the politics and political economy of education have registered the growing influence of *social theory in education*. In the twentieth century, *sociology of education* has emerged as a broad theory of public schooling systems concerned in particular with the reproduction of power and class privilege.

The early *foundations of educational theory* were a particular epistemological construction of the postwar era that recognized the contribution of the foundational disciplines (philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology). In the 1980s it gave way increasingly to theories and new specialities in the economics, management and organization of education, culminating in a new constellation based on concepts of leadership and management studies. Another discipline that grew up quickly in the postwar period was the field of *policy studies* (*policy sciences*, after Lindbolm), which was quickly applied to education, leading to forms of policy analysis with many methodological refinements and the assertion of approaches focusing on the development, analysis, evaluation and critique of public policy. This fifth wave of theory development in education sought action-oriented methodologies to solve practical problems.

Curriculum theory, which developed in the late twentieth century, is a broad field of curriculum studies devoted to examining, designing and evaluating curricula and curriculum discourses. More recently, it is possible to see the growing influence of theories of online, distance education and elearning construed as technology-based theories of learning and instruction.

Behaviourism, cognitivism and connectionism offered now standard theories of learning that have been used to examine the foundations of learning in relation to educational technology based on analogies with machine-learning and metaphors of the human brain as a computer. These theories that drew heavily from the works of Skinner, Piaget, and Bruner have been now supplemented with a range of approaches from cognitive science and neuroscience focusing on emergent processes of neural networks. Social and cultural educational psychology stemming from the work of Vygotsky and to a lesser extent Bahktin focused on the cultural mediation of human consciousness and species-specific characteristic of human beings in relation to their environment. Cultural-historical psychology is an integrative and holistic developmental science of mind, brain and culture. Constructivism, as a learning theory, normally ascribed to Piaget emphasized how individuals construct new knowledge from their experiences on the basis of processes of *accommodation* and *assimilation* to emphasize learning as an active and social process. The difficulty of charting the different shapes of education theory can be seen in the disciplinary development of the different forms of educational psychology that has gone through a number of changes including instructional design, organizational learning, classroom management and culminating in the concept of the learning sciences.

While *comparative education* has been a feature of educational theory for a long time, its importance has increased with globalization and the alleged convergence of global systems based increasingly on new forms of international standardization, normalization and evidence-based practice, and impacting on educational development theory and the role of education in the development process as a key sector of the ‘knowledge economy’.

Among this myriad of educational theories, there have emerged strong and successive paradigms that followed trends within social and political theory based mostly around new philosophical work, such as *phenomenology*, *critical theory*, *hermeneutics*, *existentialism*, *structuralism*, *poststructuralism* and *postmodernism*. Notable above all, perhaps, is the grand theory of education as a *social practice* influenced strongly by Deweyan pragmatism and Wittgensteinian language games, a Dewey–Wittgenstein configuration that, in the modern context, can be read back to Hegel and Marx and forward to map the multiplicities among Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, and Latour. This flowering of education as a theory of practice, despite its diverse origins, takes root in the work of Freire, Schon and Argyris, and in notions of the *reflective practitioner*, *situated cognition* and *communities of practice*.

In the present climate there are several noticeable tendencies:

1. A general decline of foundations as sources of theory in education.
2. A resilience of historical elements that view education in terms of a theory of practice that comes from diverse sources, including Heideggerian phenomenology and Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, but also older sources such as Aristotle, Kant and Marx.
3. The growing trend toward viewing education as a theory of practice that highlights questions of epistemology and cultural dimensions of professional practice, as well as collective learning processes.
4. A state-mandated set of research protocols and conceptions that emphasize a growing scientificity construing education as an empirical science capable of generating hypotheses and ‘laws’.
5. A coordinated state-funded sponsorship of evidence-based practice forms of progressively accumulated synthetic and meta-level analysis.
6. The growth of ‘big data’ and ‘learning analytics’ and ‘universal’ cybernetic feedback systems as a consequence of informatization of education and educational processes.

The traditional Greek notion of *theoria*, meaning ‘contemplation’ and ‘speculation’ (from ‘spectator’), is typically depicted as a system of ideas intended to explain a collection of facts or to disclose facts as an explanatory framework based on general principles. In this context it is often the case that scholars make a distinction between descriptive and normative theories. A noticeable trend has been the tendency to take seriously the production of theory in time and space. Social and cultural spaces are seen as collective human constructions that are relational, ideological and contestable on the basis of class, gender, race, age and other structural and cultural factors. Increasingly, theorists have chosen to employ approaches that recognize systems and networks as the process of world interconnectedness takes place unevenly across the

globe. The concept of society has come to be seen in terms of transformational and generative systems that involve global flows of capital, materials, information and people, and global studies has emerged as a separate field of inquiry. Much of this kind of inquiry is devoted to the status of education in 'postmodernity', or at least as an ongoing critique of assumptions of modernity and modern education; some scholars also engage with the normative dimensions of the end of modernity and dissolution of the Enlightenment.

At the same time, cultural studies has admitted lessons from feminist, Black and psychoanalytic studies to question the relations of self and society and to extend and pursue the European philosophy of the subject in terms of studies of subjectivity, involving a radical reflexivity, a decentring of the self and recognition of difference. The constitution of the subject and process of subject formation, following Foucault, has become a dominant motif and work utilizing Foucault has passed beyond him into issues of the making of cultural and global identities, social movements, various postcolonialisms, neocolonialisms and the rise of indigenous studies. The major preoccupation of cultural studies has been the definition of culture itself and the relation between culture, power and society. Bourdieu's influence has been decisive, with his theory of a cultural field that situates works within the social conditions of their production, circulation and consumption and attempts to reconcile subjective experiences with social structures. His emphasis of positionality and cultural production has led also to questioning of the production of social and cultural theory itself, with a problematizing of the European classical legacy and its northern roots together with a problematizing of Eurocentrism in theory constructions. Simultaneously, the critique of the universalizing northern theory has been supplemented by the rapid flourishing of indigenous theory and the theory of indigenous education.

In this environment, and especially since the global financial crisis and the Great Recession of 2008, there has been a rebirth of critical theory revisiting Marx in terms of the emerging political economy of finance capital and media culture. Its influence on education and education policy is critical, especially given forms of policy convergence, the emergence of learning analytics and big data, the emergence of world policy agencies, the strength of major publishers and global testing projects and methodologies. To theorize this kind of development requires a multidisciplinary background drawing on an understanding of the history of cybernetics, network theory, critical media studies and educational technology. Perhaps the field that is best positioned to deal with this kind of critical global development of education might be critical policy studies in education and/or global studies in education.

What is clear is that at this stage of globalization of education we urgently need global theories that can take into account the forces of globalization—economic, social, cultural and technological. Existing educational theory, anchored in American and European sources and wedded to nationalistic projects, is woefully inadequate for the emerging global policy convergences, open access and big data projects. This criticism is especially pertinent to philosophy of education, which now needs to turn itself inside-out to examine the cultural basis of its theoretical orientations and to examine its theories of ethics, epistemology and ontology in global terms. The future of educational philosophy and theory is a theme I addressed in *Futures for Philosophy of*

Education (Peters, 2008), where I attempted to lay out futures in an applied philosophical framework that is akin to what Foucault, after Nietzsche, calls ‘histories of the present’, driven by a genealogical investigation of value and guided by the epistemological question of how the historical awareness of our present circumstances affect what and how we know and can know. I believe I am now more sensitive to the cultural sites of theory, their travel, export and uneven receptivities, which affect both who reads them and how they apply, use and modify them. There are two new constraints for the construction of theory—the imperative for a critical global account and the need for radically intercultural educational theory.

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