

What's a nice theory like yours doing in a practice like this? And other impertinent questions about practitioner research¹

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A long address is pretty antithetical to my usual practice as a teacher and teacher educator. The very idea of talking for many minutes to me means that whatever I say must be awfully good, or I'd better expect that folks will start wiggling in their spots on the story couch. So I thought that I'd better approach this instance of thinking publicly about issues of theory in practitioner research by using the same principles which guide my teaching. Betraying my long years as a teacher of elementary and middle school aged children, I often use a bit of butcher paper and crayons with university students to help us collectively take on the representation and discussion of ideas from our readings and experiences. This is particularly needed in a graduate seminar: we often consciously 'level the playing field' by charging small groups of students with the task of 'representing' discussions of lofty concepts through this medium. It is an act of collective synthesis which, to me, seems to reduce the privilege of those most comfortable with academic discourse and allows those most closely aligned with the lives of children—especially young children, a familiar medium. While I didn't bring my crayons today, I see this presentation as my piece of butcher paper to share.

In this talk today, I hope to raise some questions and offer some general thoughts about two main issues. First, I seek to offer ideas intended to demystify the process of research and the nature of the theories that emanate from them. In this, I draw on the work of the popular knowledge and participatory action research movements (for example, Fals-Borda & Rahman 1991; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson 1993; Selener 1997; Smith, Willms & Johnson 1997), in recognition of their efforts in highlighting and valorising grassroots forms of theory production. I do not want to look only through the lenses of theories generated in the academy, but rather to make the work of practitioners more explicitly known as theory production. Second, I want to explore the relationship between theory generated through the practice of academics and theory generated by everyday practitioners outside the academy. I pay particular attention to alternative sources of theory production—those inside the academy, but outside of the dominant academic traditions, the voices of what Patricia Hill Collins calls the 'outsider within' (1990), and the voices of educators whose 'students' are those engaged in social struggle. As such, I will invoke a bit from such sources as voices from labor history and African-American scholarship, reclaiming them as important traditions in this debate. I see the two tasks as interrelated, with both forming integral parts of my practice as a teacher and as a researcher. In fact, they form a bridge between what are often seen as two disparate aspects of academic practice. A central issue to my work is to explore ways in which grassroots thought and practice, non-dominant groups' work, as well as the efforts of those in privileged academic positions can be reconciled and fruitfully used.

Over the past decade, research by and with practitioners has gained an acceptance, or at least has established grounds for contestation within teaching and accreditation agencies in various fields and levels of the state. On the one hand, this has brought new recognitions,

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even celebrations of the knowledge or even wisdom of those who engage at the day-to-day level in social practices that are both educational and healing–caring. Yet despite such important gains, there are crucial questions to address, ones emanating both from practice as well as from the salience of practitioner research as a ‘growth industry’ within the academy, but also within both the public and private sectors.

In teaching my classes, I often remind myself that in-so-far as research is concerned—whether by practitioners in universities or those in other settings—it is the simple and somewhat impertinent questions that are the most important. For me, these questions serve as reminders that regardless of how elegantly or straightforwardly we address issues, it is the *discussion* of topics, the nature and function of theory, for example, that is most generative of action. Throughout the process of questioning, there is a sense not of answers and closure, but of contradiction and tension, propelling us forward to new understandings, new questions, and new avenues to explore in action. Today, I raise three somewhat impertinent questions, centred around issues of theory in research by and with practitioners. Keeping in mind that practitioner research as a social phenomenon has dual origins—in the academy as well as in grassroots efforts around social and economic justice agendas (Noffke 1997), the paper addresses three basic questions:

1. ‘What good is a theory?’
2. ‘What does a theory know?’ and, the question in the title of the paper,
3. ‘What’s a nice theory like yours doing in a practice like this?’

The first question is intended to raise issues of knowledge and vision, the second to address issues of action and change, and the third to invoke issues of interest and identity.

Research by practitioners has often been said to generate theory, but there are also ways in which theory generated through academic ‘practice’ (neo-marxist, feminist, and post-modernist, and the like) is frequently used to frame understandings of research by practitioners. The paper ends with an argument that the varied conceptions and functions of theory that have and have not been employed within practitioner research are significant indicators of needed directions in practitioner research efforts. There is a need for reflexivity—for building theory centred on grassroots practice, especially given the significant roles of difference and oppression in any social practice.

Knowledge and vision, or What good is a theory?

For me, at least, any attempt to construct or assess a theory begins by making clear the values embedded in it through its authors as well as through the values of the people whom it might most closely and deeply affect. It is about ‘Whose knowledge?’ (Beyer & Apple 1998), but also about the meaning of caring in understanding both the knowledge and the vision of individuals and groups. Whose theory is it? What meaning does it have in the daily lives and larger social, political, and economic contexts of those whose lives are situated in and through educational practice? How are some theories seen in relation to those of others more closely connected to the practice? In reading and doing research (by practitioners in the academy or by those in other work contexts), the question of ‘good’ in theory and in the overall project is one of asking ‘Who cares?’

There are two tendencies visible in the written literature and heard in the many dialogues and sharings in and around practitioner research. One is the strong tendency to reject ‘outsider–academic’ theory outright and the other is to superimpose theory without deep

consideration of issues of identity, context, and power. Both of these lead to or embody a tendency to see theory as universal, as if it were not grounded and bounded in contradictory ways in the experiences of the theory-makers. The 'good', the 'caring' of a theory is part of the identity and values of the theorists in a practice. Theory outlines, describes, and seeks understanding for action by the questions and puzzles of that situation. While theory is often derived analytically, it also exists experientially. Its value therefore cannot be abstracted from identity and context.

In the United States, action research, especially in professional development contexts, is a 'growth industry' in the academy and in professional organisations. While technical rationality predominates, it hasn't precluded the tremendous flowering of various versions of practitioner research (Zeichner & Noffke, in press). Many of these versions, framed in theory generated through academic practice, have brought opportunities to understand, change, and work in practice in new and insightful ways (for example, Carr & Kemmis 1988). There has also been much in the way of theory generated through the work of practitioner researchers, but there has been little attempt to bring these together and make them available to a wider audience (for an exception, see Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993). The lack of response on the part of academics to the latter body of theory resonates with another omission—the narrow range of theory thus far used to explore issues in practitioner research. For example, while there are rare instance of some versions of feminist theory coupled with action research (Maguire 1987), the versions of theory generated from within the work and lives of people of colour has only marginally been addressed (Bunbury, Hastings, Henry & McTaggart 1991). This is important in thinking through the 'good' of a theory, in that I would argue that the nature of value in theory cannot be seen as abstracted from the identity of the theorist or from the theoretical context.

The work of W.E.B. DuBois (who, to many, is the 'father' of modern sociological research), for example, exemplifies the new 'good' revealed from examining theory generated from contexts outside those of the European-American dominant society, ones speaking 'beyond the veil' of racism and oppression. DuBois's writings are a rich source of educational theory, highly relevant to the current context of changing 'school to work' relationships. A brief excerpt from his works, reveals but a small instance of their importance:

We need then, first, training as human beings in general knowledge and experience; then technical training to guide and do a specific part of the world's work. The broader training should be the heritage and due of all but today it is curtailed by poverty...The teachers of such a stream of students must be of high order. College teachers cannot follow the medieval tradition of withdrawal from the world...The teacher in a Negro college has got to be something far more than a master of a branch of human knowledge. He has got to be able to impart his knowledge to human beings whose place in the world is today precarious and critical; and the possibilities and advancement of that human being in the world where he is to live and earn a living is of just as much importance in the teaching process as the content of the knowledge taught (DuBois 1930/1973, p. 78).

Deeply enmeshed in the struggle for social and economic justice, DuBois wrote strong words on the importance of economic democracy and on economic self determination, and articulated a coherent body of pedagogical and curriculum theory of much significance to the

then contemporary higher education debates over university versus vocational education for African Americans. Yet his sociological research gathered the data for, and his powerful text was strategically designed as an intervention into the political struggle. His knowledge and vision, the ‘good’ of his theory, was deeply rooted in his identity, his sense of caring in and for the world. The function of that caring in and for social justice leads to the next question, one that seeks to connect a sense of purpose with questions of how we know.

Action and change, or What does a theory know?

Simply understood, theory offers explanations, predictions, and often reduces uncertainty while at the same time it increases complexity. It can allow an alternative basis for judgment of action to emerge. In everyday life, a knowledge of theory allows us to see ways in which our ‘common sense’ ideas are permeated by the residue of older theories, forming boundaries and limits for our identities and experiences.

I have spent most of my adult life with children. I often wonder at the almost simultaneous claims to understanding things as they are and queries about what is going on that are so often a part of children’s thinking. The questions of what and how we know, as embodied in theories, raise issues not only of the processes by which we come to know something, but also of the kinds of things we accept as evidence. Focusing attention on these issues allows us to explore the ways in which our identities and experiences shape those things which we believe we understand as well as those which are not visible to us. In research that is deeply embedded in practice, there can be no simple reliance on methods of analysis deemed to be objective and neutral, or even those named as subjective and interpretive. The very processes of data collection and analysis shape collective understandings and form the basis of new forms of social solidarity: Knowing is in relationships to and with others involved in practice (Brennan & Noffke 1997).

In order to engage in research, there needs to be a recognition of the limits of our current understandings—the fragility of our knowledge claims—as we engage in social practices which push at their boundaries. It is both how we know, as well as how it is that we do not know (and perhaps cannot know) that is at stake. How do we come to visualise (as educators and other workers must in their daily practice) things we have not known or come to perceive as other ways of knowing? How is it that we have not heard, seen, or recognised them? Through such questionings, the effort is not to establish the known, but to identify the nature and limits of current understandings. I do not seek to fully fathom what a theory knows, but rather use the theory to help me see what has not yet been visible to me. It is this impertinent question of theory—‘How do you know?’—that propels me to engage in meaningful action.

Many years ago Carter G. Woodson, in *The mis-education of the Negro* (1933/1977), a work too often neglected in dominant versions of curriculum studies, reminded us that the limits on knowing are integrally connected to the unequal positions of people in the society. The recognition of this basic position forces us to see a deep connection between knowledge and action, in this case educational action. As Woodson argued:

In the first place, we must bear in mind that the Negro has never been educated. He merely has been informed about other things which he has not been permitted to do (1933/1977, p. 144).

As with DuBois, Woodson's work emphasises careful study and embodies a view of such research as deeply connected to social justice efforts. His many publications in the academic press were closely paralleled with the production of materials for the then segregated classrooms. As with DuBois, Woodson also sponsored journals which reached countless families, churches, and schools.

Our construction the role of theory in practitioner research can gain a great deal by bearing these examples in mind. What and how a theory knows cannot be separated from what it is to *do*. Here, the words of Horace Mann Bond, another prominent African American educator, are useful. What a 'nice theory' is to do in practice depends greatly on our assessment of what it is we know, as well as our sense of caring. Mann's assessment predates much of contemporary theories of cultural and economic reproduction, but is also firmly rooted in an understanding of the workings of education within a racialised society:

Let us confess that the schools have never built a new social order, but have always in all times and in all lands been the instruments through which social forces were perpetuated. If our new curriculum revision is to do better, it must undertake an acceptance of the profound social and economic changes which are now taking place in the world (Bond 1935, p. 168).

Such fundamental assumptions lead to radically different conclusions about, for example, the role of teachers in social change. As Woodson urged:

But can you expect teachers to revolutionise the social order for the good of the community? Indeed we must expect this very thing. The educational system of a country is worthless unless it accomplishes this task (1933/1977, p. 145).

The examination of what a theory knows is fundamentally connected to both the identity and sense of caring of the theorist, as well as responsive to the context of the practice. It is to the question of what theory is to do that I now turn.

Interest and identity in knowing, or What's a nice theory like yours doing in a practice like this?_

Throughout this paper, there have been constant invocations of issues of interest and identity. The third question seeks to raise these same issues in direct relationship to action—What can a theory do in and through a practice? Another way to word this question is to ask an even simpler question: 'So what?' This question impels us not only to name and justify the interests which have led us to our study and the things we have learned by engaging in practice and the study of practice, but also to identify the ways in which the contradictions we uncover help to shape actions which are ethically defensible and politically strategic (Noffke 1995).

Although it seems too obvious to mention, research is equally about knowing and doing. Studying things and theorising about them are not only things which inform action; they are in themselves social practices. I have gained much over the years both from memories of interactions with children and from work with others who struggle in and for teaching. I have also benefited from my interactions with people who have helped me to 'see through a

glass darkly'² where I am in society. In my daily work as an educator, I constantly make decisions about ethics and politics in relation to my actions. A cluster of such decisions surround issues of how I choose to make my work 'public' (Stenhouse 1983, p. 185). In a sense, though, my practice is always 'public': I hear, see, and feel at a concert, as I watch a dance; I am part of the 'testimony' at a church group meeting; I witness the creation of a quilt signifying people's experiences; I learn with people participating in a slide-tape presentation of their research 'findings'. These events and all the other multiple ways of 'reporting' in the social context, send me forward into new understandings of the 'So what?' question, understandings which are both in thought and about action.

My public experiences also push me toward asking, 'What does it mean to ask such impertinent questions?'. This is a matter not only of caring, of knowing, or even knowing 'What is to be done?' (Lenin 1902/1969), but also of thinking through what else is being done that might inform my/our practice. What is being done that my privileged positions (not only that of academic, but as one who has benefitted from the privileges structured into White identity) have not allowed me to see? With whom does my mode of representation or reporting allow me to connect and resonate? What values and interests are evident in my mode of representation? In what ways is my method of reporting the 'signifying' (Gates 1988) of a particular, implied audience? As my practice involves education, I return always to the question of 'How does this make the lives of children and those who share their lives in and out of schools better?'³. For me that unattainable, ever-changing goal is a major filter for assessing what a 'nice' theory, both that generated in and from my practice as well as that brought in through a 'critical friend', must do.

Myles Horton and the many others associated with the Highlander Center have spent their lives in social struggle. Their efforts contributed greatly to the labor movement, to the Civil Rights movement, and still continue to contribute to the project of economic, political, and social justice. Horton commented many years ago:

Goals are unattainable in the sense that they always grow. My goal for the tree I planted in front of my house is for it to get big enough to shade the house, but that tree is not going to stop growing once it shades my house. It's going to keep on growing bigger regardless of whether I want it to or not. The nature of my visions are to keep on growing beyond my conception. That is why I say it's never completed. I think there always has to be struggle. In any situation there will always be something that's worse, and there will always be something that's better, so you continually strive to make it better. That will always be so, and that's good, because there ought to be growth. You die when you stop growing (1990, p. 228).

Our theories form the current boundaries of our goals. The growth in our theorising and the intertwined growth in our capacity for action can be fed by the theories of others both inside and outside of our practice. Yet it is important to attend not only to the question of 'So what?', but also to the earlier questions of 'Who cares?' and 'How do you know?', as these outline the identities and interests of the theorist, thus forming important guidelines for strategically evaluating the potential of those theories for action.

² Apostle Paul circ. AD 55, 1 Corinthians 13.12, *The Bible*.

³ This point was brought home to me through many conversations with John St. Julien.

For a long time, I have both worried about and hoped for the increased embedding of practitioner research in the academy and in school staff development programs. Important questions for me, especially as one who is located within the cultural practices of a university are, 'Why have so many people sought a distinctive and rigorous theoretical framework for 'good' practitioner research, at least in part derived from academic theory?' and 'Is there a need for such a framework?' While I have been a part of and continue in the struggle for the acceptance of practitioner research in both of these contexts, I have done so with the understanding that the political economy of knowledge production is also the production of legitimation. Universities, state departments of education, school districts, and indeed all of us as practitioners engage in research because we seek to understand things, but we also, whether overtly or tacitly under the guise of objectivity, seek to legitimate ourselves and our work. Theory and various forms of academic writing often play a role in such legitimation efforts. But the complete rejection of theoretical resources outside one's own practice may also serve as a form of legitimation.

Those of us who belong to relatively privileged positions in society can justify these actions through positioning ourselves as allies in the struggle against oppressive social conditions. In so doing, we must also recognise that we employ theory and engage in theorising as much through what we *do* as through who we cite as sources of our knowing. The two are intertwined. We speak messages of knowing in our embodied theories; we testify through our lives and those of the children, students, parents, and community members who share out practice. Regardless of how we see our positions, we do not 'give voice' to those in less powerful positions. Rather, we must see ourselves as part of the process of breaking apart the barriers for speakers and listeners, writers and readers, which are perpetuated through and act to support our privileged positions.

The process of theorising cannot then be treated as separated from our agendas as social actors. What the 'nice theory' is doing in our practice is bounded by its ability to extend our knowledge of our selves—our roles in social actions. We come to know ourselves and those parts of ourselves which are built on the oppression of others by unpacking the theories embedded in our actions. In so doing and as a result of that doing, we open up or 'subject' ourselves to the scrutiny of others, always knowing that the power differentials are not equal. We create representations of ourselves, of 'where we are at', peopling the forces that others feel and see through aesthetic, spiritual, economic, and political lenses. We see ourselves in all our absences and preserved privileges. Both are aspects of human diversity in terms of power, and related to the process of theorising practitioner research.

A quote from Myles Horton is again useful in the struggle to see new relationships between the theorists, the theories, and the sphere of action:

When we first started Highlander, we had ideas that we tried to apply to a situation. We started by moving from theory to practice. It took us only a few months to learn that we were starting the wrong way, because we weren't reaching the people. We realised it was necessary to learn how to learn from these people, so we started with the practical, with the things that were, and we moved from there to test our theories and our ways of thinking. We reversed the usual process; instead of coming from the top down and going from the theoretical to the practical, trying to force the theory on the practical, we learned you had to take what people perceive their problems to be, not what we perceive their problems to be. We had to learn how to find out about the people, and then take that and put it into a program. Sometimes that

knowledge ties into some theories, but if the theories don't fit the practice, then you say the theory is wrong, not the other way around. Before, we had been saying that if the practice didn't fit the theory, the people were wrong, and we tried to force the people into the theory. It's the way we are all socialised by education (1990, p. 140).

For those of us working in education, doing practitioner research, the important questions to ask about theory are often clouded by that same socialisation. What matters is not only which theory will be useful to our research, but *whose* theory it is and how it is constructed and continuously reconstructed. As we identify and come to know what 'the people' means to us, we move from seeing how we can 'help' those oppressed toward seeing how our freedom is dependent upon the freedom of those 'others'. Only when practitioner research embodies the collective struggle in both theorising and acting, does it move away from traditional forms of research. As Horton noted:

Any educational philosophy comes out of what you do and how you deal with people. When you believe in people and the importance of trying to create a democracy, you must turn these beliefs into practice, and if you don't believe in the free enterprise system and individual competitiveness, you practice group action and cooperation. You practice learning in groups so that people can learn to solve problems through group action (1990, p. 175).

Just doing what needs doing

Through our research work, we hope, not for 'validation' through the public sharings of our efforts, although such warmth and solidarity do sustain us. We mostly hope for help in understanding the contradictions, the consonances and dissonances in our 'reporting', that will help us and others see spaces for the creation of new action and thought (Noffke 1995). It is important not to reject any of the resources available to us toward that end, but also not to be seduced by their beauty and elegance or by their ability to make us more comfortable that we know and understand things. Practitioner research can be usefully informed by a number of theories and practices, both from within traditional research methods, but also those shaped by newer qualitative, feminist, and critical race theories (Denzin 1997, Harding 1993, Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). In this era in which the historically dominant world has been forced to see the globalised context which others have so long had to recognise and live within, it is increasingly important that we, as theorists and practitioners, continually return to the essential questions of practitioners involved in trying to understand their social world in order to and while they are transforming it (Fals Borda 1994). Response to the most impertinent questions must be informed by but also help to shape the theories and actions of academic practitioners. We need to see ourselves as working alongside practitioners in other social contexts.

If one is to think about theory in relation to its ability to 'help' in the transformation from an unjust and unequal society (which I assume we now have) into one where social and economic justice are realities in the making, we must first consider what 'helping' means. One possible way to 'help' is through the process of seeing things differently, of 'getting free of oneself' (Popkewitz & Brennan 1998). Through its attempts at descriptions beyond the unique, the particular, some theories can help us to transform an issue of the self (a question of what do 'I' do) into one that is shared (an issue of 'we') in a particular context.

This transformation is neither discrete nor finite. The 'naming' that occurs through theorising the ordinary activities of people's lives and experiences organises the things we know in very real and useful ways. It also opens up and 'names' those areas which we do not know, and perhaps cannot know. Identifying the silences and silencing of our knowledge requires courage. If theories are linked to actions—if theory 'helps' practice, then it is our whole world, not just our academic lives or our classrooms, that is at stake.

In many written reports of research, there is little attention paid to the kinds of action that are made possible by the new knowledge generated through the research process. In practitioner research, it is important the action not be seen as an 'add on', a policy to be derived and implemented later, once the research is completed. Rather, actions are intertwined with research *toward* a goal, however unattainable—what Orlando Fals Borda (1996) calls a 'commitment':

Participatory researchers in the Third World contributed to this merger [between Northern and South Hemisphere scholars concerned with knowledge, power, and justice and their relationships] a version of 'commitment' which combined *paxis* and *phronesis*, that is, horizontal participation with peoples and wise judgment and prudence for the good life. In my case, this sociopolitical combination was placed in the service of peasants' and workers' struggles, which meant a clear break from the Establishment plus an active, sometimes dangerous search for social justice there. But I could not consider myself a scientist, even less a human being, if I did not exercise the 'commitment' and felt it in my heart and in my head as a life experience, *Erfahrung* or *Vivencia* (p. 5).

Research by and with practitioners in education and in other fields of social labor carries with it a fundamental need to be clear about one's commitments, so that they can be questioned as part of the study. Our readings of the works of scholar-activists like DuBois, Woodson, Fals Borda and Horton give us the sense that theories can be vital parts of the struggle to improve human lives. Theories are the voices of history; they are narrative embodiments but also representations in action.

What a 'nice theory' is doing in our practice can be judged in terms of its usefulness to a social movement. Without connection to commitment, theory generated through academic practice alone can operate to recolonise, to 'rename' and appropriate the struggle, rather than to liberate. As Paulo Freire, another scholar-activist, highlighted throughout his words and work, theory needs to be about helping people to name themselves and their conditions, thereby aiding in their transformation. Collectively authored and critiqued according to its commitments, 'nice theory' has much to do in our practice.

If this type of committed, participatory research really helps the poor peoples (which are the majorities of the world) to exercise their human and social rights, if it unveils the conditions of their oppression and exploitation; if it assists in overcoming the constraints of savage capitalism, violence, militarism, and ecological destruction; if it endeavours to understand, tolerate and respect different genres, cultures and races, and to heed the voice of Others, then sociology and the social sciences can be expected to survive well and meaningfully the tensions of modernity (Fals Borda 1995, p. 4).

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