Australian Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 14 | Issue 1 Article 2

1989

An Idea to Save Educational Theory

M. A. B. Degenhardt
University of Tasmania

AN IDEA TO SAVE EDUCATIONAL THEORY

M. A. B. Degenhardt
University of Tasmania

The future looks gloomy for educational theory. The place of theory in the education of teachers and in deliberations on educational policy, is being speedily reduced. The number of persons employed to teach educational theory is declining and many of those who remain are having to teach adulterated or dubiously 'relevant' theory regarding which they can feel no real enthusiasm or honest commitment. It is possible that some areas of educational theory which have developed impressively over the last two or three decades will almost vanish. Already one can discern the unhappy consequences for practice. Thus a valuable contribution to this year's PESA conference was Robin Barrow's attack on 'the Genetic Fallacy' in education - on the notion that it is possible, let alone meaningful, for educators to set about developing generic abilities and capacities of mind, such as critical thinking skills or reasoning abilities. Barrow's talk was timely and left little room for doubt as to the highly questionable nature of many contemporary curriculum developments. His critique is urgently needed. Yet it ought not to be. For a quarter of a century ago a central plank in Paul Hirst's 'Forms of Knowledge' thesis was that it only made sense to talk of abilities and powers of the mind within specific contexts such as those provided by the disciplines of knowledge. Compatible conclusions had long been emerging from psychological work on transfer of training. Of course an educational innovator might study such views and discern grounds for rejecting them. Yet recent 'thinking skills' talk seems to be in ignorance rather than informed denial of these bodies of theorising. So sweeping reforms of practice are being introduced by people who seem to be unaware of good theoretical inquiries which suggest that their reforms may be mistaken and damaging, and give helpful pointers as to how they might be improved.

The parlous state of educational theory is in part just one instance of the parlous state of humane studies in general. 'Economic rationalism' and 'technicism' are riding high and the decline of humane inquiries into the ends, character and better conduct of education is one with more general cultural developments. Yet the plight of educational theory is particular unhappy in that scholars in other humane disciplines are generally unimpressed by our contributions, and unsupportive of us.

Not surprisingly, many who care for humane learning and educational inquiry now evidence great despair. We often hear remarks to the effect that the only thing to do is to keep going as best we can and to wait (or hope) for the tide to turn. This is a clear instance of Sartrean 'bad faith', whereby the 'tide' metaphor seduces us into seeing human affairs as changing or developing in an involuntary and ineluctable way as is the case with law-governed changes in physical nature. Indeed one important reason for valuing humane studies is precisely that they celebrate and explore the freedom of human conduct and the ways in which ideas can inform and guide this freedom. So educational theorists and other humane inquirers should know better than to just wait for the 'tide' to turn: they should be particularly aware of the possibility and responsibility of doing something to turn it.

This paper makes some suggestions as to what might be done. I hope that they will engender critical discussion and the mooting of other possibilities. First there must be some clarification of the nature and grounds of the attack on educational theory. It is, after all, prima facie odd that in a context of disquiet with the ends educators pursue and the standards they achieve there should be hostility to attempts to better understand the nature and improvement of the educational enterprise. Yet those of us who are committed educational theorists have long had to live with the facts that not everyone esteems what we have to offer and that much of the liveliest dis-esteem comes from the very people we most aspire to help: working school teachers. We know too that many academics, administrators and politicians, as well as members of the general public who have an interest in education, tend to be dismissive of educational theorising. A few years ago governments and educational authorities were encouraging the development and teaching of educational theory. Now such policies are being reversed.

We should not overestimate such hostility or dismissiveness toward theory. After all the present anti-theoretical mood is in part a response to the repercussions in practice of the 'new' sociology of education that captivated the minds of student teachers in the 1970s. It is noticeable that most working teachers now speak the language of theory to an extent that would have been remarkable fifteen years ago (and, indeed, in ways that will trouble those theorists who would resist the intrusions of technicist thinking into human relationships). Moreover administrators who are hostile to theory for teachers often draw quite avidly on theories about how to run things.

However, notwithstanding such allowances, anti-theoretical sentiments and policies remain powerful, so it is important to ponder the extent to which this can be attributed to ignorance, unreflectiveness and philistinism, and the extent to which it reflects a reasonable estimate of the objective worth of educational theorising. In other words we must ask: Has educational theory earned it's bad name? Clearly much criticism of theory just is ill-informed. Thus Kenneth Baker, when he was Minister for Education under Mrs Thatcher, announced

that trainee teachers in the U.K. were spending too much time studying educational history, apparently unaware that this subject had largely disappeared from courses for beginning teachers. At the same time, however, some opposition to theory is informed and thoughtful. Indeed some of the most distinguished of educational theorists have despaired of doing justice to their subjects on short courses of initial teacher education, and propose that it should be confined to advanced, in-service courses. This, of course, is not a total rejection of theory. It does amount to an allowance that working teachers can manage without it and that it is less important than other studies which are not to be indefinitely postponed. Perhaps even more revealing are the judgements of many educational theorists on the work of other theorists. It is a rare enthusiast for theory who thinks that all kinds of educational theory are valuable. Many theorists find the work of their fellows altogether ill-founded, wrong-headed, charlatan and practically pernicious. We find here a division and antagonism of judgements and approaches much more profound and pervasive than those healthy disagreements that keep the best disciplines alive and growing. So it is barely conceivable that all, or even most, educational theory is good theory. If some of it is on the right lines some of it is so different that is must be pointless if not bad and harmful. Moreover there is no clear agreement, or even basis for agreement, on how we are to distinguish the good from the bad. What does seem reasonable to assert is that it can hardly be to the long term advantage of theory or of educators that the two presently most favoured areas of educational theory are 'curriculum' and 'administration' - two areas notoriously lacking in firm foundations, scrupulous self-criticism and educational reference. (See Degenhardt, 1989).

A recent attack on educational theory that is well-informed is contained in Anthony O'Hear's pamphlet, Who Teaches the Teachers? for O'Hear is a professor of philosophy who has taught in secondary schools and in faculties of education and written importantly on educational theory. His central contention is that teachers entering the profession need not and should not do courses in 'education'. So those who oppose theory without really understanding it will welcome an ally who does. Indeed there is a real possibility that O'Hear's pamphlet will be very influential, and not just in the United Kingdom; and this in part because it draws on and incorporates some good educational theorising. There are two prongs to his attack.

1. He says that much of the theory taught in education courses is just bad. It gets there partly because teachers are at a loss to fill up time allocated to educational studies, and partly for ideological reasons. Thus, for example, there is 'a quite disproportionate emphasis on questions of race and inequality' underpinned by very inadequate theorising such as that of M.F.D. Young. This he thinks is a passing fad about to yield to 'education for enterprise'. Both are not really educational at all for they are concerned with social engineering rather than 'the initiation of pupils into proven and worthwhile forms of knowledge' (p.22). It would be possible for students of education to improve their minds by studying the educational thought of thinkers of stature (Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Arnold, Durkheim and Dewey are mentioned). This, he seems to think, does not happen.

2. Educational Studies, good or bad, are not really necessary to good teaching. What are necessary are knowledge and love of the subject one is to teach, practical teaching experience alongside of already experienced teachers, and emotional maturity. These we get in various ways but not through studying 'education'.

O'Hear's second point would presumably carry most weight against theory on Dip.Ed. courses where time is of the utmost. The first point would be a basis for criticism of B.Ed. courses where students spend much time learning about education with less time available to study the content of education.

If O'Hear's case carries weight it is also susceptible of serious criticisms. He takes an almost simplistic view of what is required in a good teacher, making no allowance for the facts that there are different views on this matter, that rapidly and profoundly changing educational circumstances create changing needs, and that there is much advantage to a school in having a team of teachers with different kinds of strengths. All these considerations indicate the value of having teachers whose education is wider than subject expertise - an education that includes wide ranging reflections on education itself. Nor does O'Hear even begin to consider the different kinds of educational theorising and the different ways in which they can inform practice. An even odder omission is any consideration of that outstandingly important area of educational studies: curriculum or method courses. It is most important that those who care for educational theory should carefully heed his attack not just because it needs to be answered in its own right but because it encapsulates many of those hostilities to educational theory that are more generally if less precisely felt.

The general thrust of contemporary attacks on theory seems to be not against any teaching of educational theory - the move is more typically toward confining theory to in-service and other advanced courses. (O'Hear seems to me to be not clear on this point). It is not impossible that theory could vanish from initial teacher education altogether. Then there would be fewer people working as educational theorists and so, less time and energy devoted to the development and refinement of the educational understanding that we already have. Also, and more seriously, it would mean that most teachers would enter the profession ignorant of those reflections and investigations which have been devoted to achieving a better understanding of the enterprise in which they are about to engage. It would not be correct to say that they will enter education without any educational theories - but their theories will be largely homespun, ill grounded in careful argument or empirical inquiry and ill formed of other possible perspectives. Indeed one of the great rewards of being engaged in initial

teacher education is the startled and often excited responses of students when one calls in doubt highly questionable suppositions that they had just taken for granted (that education is nothing to do with politics, that values are just a matter of how you feel, that all thinking processes are basically the same ...). It would be correct to say that to have beginning teachers engage in no educational studies could lead to elitism within the profession whereby an experienced and additionally educated minority could claim that they alone have the educational expertise appropriate to informed decision making. Indeed something like this seems to be the wish of many anti-theorists.

In part the job in hand for the friends of educational theory must be to meet the arguments of O'Hear and Co. with better counter arguments. But the long-term task must be more demanding. In so far as O'Hear and others have a strong case by virture of the rotten-ness of much educational theory, then the only answer is to ensure that the theory gets better. This will hardly be done in a hurry and to offer a list of nostrums would only be to endorse the harshest judgements of the anti-theorists. There are, of course, many things that can be worked on and I would like to see journals such as this one become the vehicles of extended discussions on various ways to improve both the substance and the teaching of educational theory. For example, with growing commitment to general participation in educational policy making we should be trying to develop theorising that is at once rigorous and comprehensible to all. This would require the reduction of jargon and other technical obscurities and might help restore humaneness to our thinking about a distinctively humane enterprise. At the same time we should engage in more and tougher reflection on what we trying to do when we theorise. Theorists who like to tell teachers that they cannot dispense with theory, often eschew theoretical reflection on their own work, and just assume a questionable view about how they can relate to and improve practice. Very widely assumed, it seems to me, is a naively Baconian account whereby educational theorists will find out the laws governing educational processes and make this knowledge available in rules and recommendations for the improvement of practice. However very little has been forthcoming along such lines despite an abundance of expensive and highly methodological research. Naturally, theoretical inquiries appear in a poor light when they fail to do what their advocates claim they will do. Theorists are left highly vulnerable when, for example, O'Hear asks for evidence that theory improves practice. But other views of theory may have more to be said for them, and indeed O'Hear himself hints at this when he complains that theory courses often omit the study of outstanding educational thinkers. For surely he does not intend that we should derive instructional methods from Rousseau, selection procedures from Plato, or a moral education program from Durkheim. What he presumably has in mind is that by sustained reflection on and discussion of such thinkers students will refine the quality of their educational insight and judgements. This will yield them no prescriptions for action but render them able to judge more wisely when they ponder what to do in their

own teaching. I doubt if we could have tight empirical evidence for the benefits of such reflective theorising - but there are good educational reasons for valuing it.

The same might be said for another possible view of educational theory which sees it as less like applied science and more like aesthetic education or the development of connoisseurship: the view whereby engagement in educational inquiries will change the way we perceive educational situations including our own - what we notice about them, what we judge important, what seems to call for action, and so on.

There are, of course, other possible notions of educational theory and none of them should claim a monopoly. What is readily evident is that different views point to different ways of conducting educational inquiry, to different kinds of theory courses and to different criteria for success for such courses. It is hardly to the credit of educational theorists that we have hitherto given virtually no attention to such matters. It does seem to be clear that long since we should have stopped talking about *educational theory,* so as to suggest a monolithic enterprise and body of knowledge. Instead we must talk about educational theorising itself. I suspect that many of us who engage in educational inquiries often work in the semi-conscious hope that one day our work will be a very small part of some general theory of education. This may have motivational value. But it is illuminating to stop to ask ourselves what such a theory would be like, and what it would be a theory of.

I will now talk in more detail about one possible way to preserve and strengthen educational theorising that may initially sound like a move to diminish or abolish it. The suggestion is that on Dip.Ed. courses at least, educational theory should not be taught as a distinct and autonomous realm of inquiry. Of course a number of educational faculties have already moved this way. Sometimes the initiative has come from the theorists themselves. Impressed by the heavy demands placed on Dip.Ed. students, educational psychologists, philosophers and sociologists have sometimes resolved that it is really not feasible to introduce new disciplines into a short, crowded course, except by attenuating them to the point of distortion. Theoretical questions, they say, should be explored as they arise naturally out of curriculum or method courses, with 'foundation' lectures always available to join in by invitation. This may seem like a good idea until one talks to some of the method tutors involved. I remember meeting a curriculum tutor from a British education department that was engaged in making precisely the kind of move I have described. He quickly made it evident that he badly misunderstood and thoroughly disdained both philosophy and psychology, that he would be unable and unwilling to incorporate the most elementary elements of either into his discussions of English teaching. And this notwithstanding the fact that his own views of English teaching were shot through with psychological and philosophical notions linking the development of literary understanding to the development of personality and of moral awareness.

Nevertheless I want to argue that this is the kind of reform that should take place but that it must go along with a thorough-going commitment from all lecturers to ensure that the additional time made available for curriculum courses will be used in part for theoretical explorations arising out of curriculum questions, and that this will involve cooperation with 'foundation' theorists. Indeed there must be abundant opportunities for the various specialist lecturers to educate one another.

I will try to show that this is both a good pragmatic move, to save threatened educational inquiries, and that it is desirable in principle in that it will help bring about educational theorising that is much improved, properly educational, and helpful to practicing teachers.

1. The pragmatic point is that the proposal will keep educational theory alive even if we are deprived of course-time for it as such. The wielders of educational power who want people to spend less time on theory and more time in learning how to teach will surely have less objection to courses which seek, for example, to inform deliberations on how to teach maths or science or English buy drawing on psychological findings about the development of mathematical concepts or philosophical elucidations of the nature of scientific explanation, or the moral dimensions of literary understanding.

2. For related reasons this approach should be more helpful to students about to start teaching. The anti-theorists to have a point in so far as they judge that most beginning teachers are hardly ready (in understanding and motivation) to inquire into general questions of educational principle and policy. It is understandable that many, certainly not all, students are puzzled to see the point of their theoretical studies. If they remained puzzled about theoretical inquiries closely meshed in with questions about how to teach, then it might be more reasonable to suspect that the fault lies with the student, not the course.

3. It was said early that much educational theory is bad. Indeed it seems to be bad for more reasons than can be sorted out in one paper. However one very general complaint is that much that passes as educational theorising is not really educational at all. Perhaps carried away by ideological commitments, or committed to models of inquiry derived from the natural sciences, educational inquiries get deflected away from attention to bodies of knowledge and understanding, how people can learn about them and what they can do for their lives. Thus I recently learned of a course on educational leadership which used as its text a book about successful entrepreneurs and business magnates. Many books on 'curriculum' actually say nothing about the content of curricula. Learning theories evidence little discrimination of the different kinds of learning that are involved in the process of becoming educated. Thus it is that anti-theorists have a point when they complain that theory gets in the way of education rather than enhancing it. The proposed change would require teachers of educational theory to make the central focus of their attention actual educational problems and decisions that concern working teachers. Surely it would only be a matter of time before this was reflected in the kinds of research and theorising which they pursued apart from their teaching. This healthy tendency will be re-inforced by a further consequence.

4. The new model should do much for the education of educational researchers. When I worked on my research degree in philosophy of education my studies involved me in virtually no contact with educational historians, sociologists, psychologists or curriculum specialists. Many educational theorists might approve this for they seem to regard it as a matter of pride and professionalism to conduct themselves as specialists in one area of theory only and to 'waste' no time on other aspects of educational inquiry. This is surely mistaken and indeed impertinent, for we do expect our students to acquaint themselves with all foundation disciplines and to weld what they learn into a unified view yielding conclusions for practice. In other words the point of teaching the theoretical disciplines that we teach depends upon students doing something demanding and difficult that we disdain to do ourselves. This is a disgrace. On the proposal mooted here, lecturers in curriculum and in foundations would have to do a great deal of work learning about other foundation disciplines and about specialist curriculum areas. This is why total departmental commitment would be so important. Short of this, nothing would be gained and much lost. Indeed if we were to embark on such reforms it could mean that for two or three years we would be so busy educating ourselves that we would have no time to do research. In the long term however our research would be enriched, perhaps transformed, by our deeper educational understanding, and many of the complaints against educational theory would become less and less appropriate. More importantly, we would at last be able to cooperate, in mutual critique and understanding, in the teaching of educational theory that is indeed educational, that can be seen by students as having serious point, and that will help them and us to become better educators.

In sum, we could respond to the present crisis in a way that is not just pragmatically smart, but that will improve our work in ways that we should have improved it long ago.

References

Degenhardt, M.A.B., (May 1989), Curriculum as Fraud, *Unicorn,* Vol.15, No. 2, pp.97-99.

O'Hear, A., (1988) *Who Teaches the Teachers?* The Social Affairs Unit, London.