

The longstanding educational problem of "translating theory into practice" is not a problem in the conventional sense of a question proposed for solution. Consideration of the problem's inverse, "translating practice into theory" serves to identify certain widely-shared assumptions about the nature and structure of the problem that render it insoluble, *in principle*. In particular, the maintenance of the "problem" depends upon (1) the semantic ambiguity engendered by several idiosyncratic meanings of both "theory" and "practice" and (2) a conceptual confusion regarding their relationship with one another.

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Theory Into Practice or Vice Versa? Comments on an Educational Antinomy

There is a close relative of the Cartesian Mind/Body Problem in education that could be called the Theory/Practice Problem. And educators have been pre-occupied for some time now in an analogous Cartesian search for the 'pineal gland' that would somehow connect or reconcile the two terms of the dualism. The problem is that educational theory and educational practice have merely co-existed side by side, but have remained essentially separate from and un-connected with one another. As a consequence, there exists, metaphorically speaking, a "gap" that requires a "bridge". The solution is more frequently asserted as "the need to translate theory into practice." But however stated, the issue is by now so familiar to all educators that it has doubtlessly become tiresome for most.

It is odd that this familiar problem, which can be stated so clearly that it appears to imply its own solution, continues to endure. Indeed, it is precisely this tiresome persistence of the problem which suggests that there may be something fundamentally wrong with the way the problem has been conceived. This has prompted us to examine the possibility that the theory/practice problem, as commonly understood by educators, contains certain tacit, even unconscious, assumptions about the nature of the problem that quite literally prevent its solution.

The psychological literature on problem-solving and original thinking refers to these solution-inhibiting assumptions as "negative sets."¹ The special difficulty that such negative sets present is that they are usually unconscious. As a consequence, they persist unless one's habitual perception of the problem undergoes radical restructuring. Eliminating or "breaking" the negative set typically necessitates seeing the problem in a new way that will reveal the limiting assumptions that have prevented its solution.

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¹Wilbert S. Ray, *The Experimental Psychology of Original Thinking* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

To further complicate matters, *familiar* problems (like the theory/practice problem) are perhaps the least susceptible to re-structuring or the most difficult to see in a new way. There are, however, a number of general problem-solving heuristics that can help one to re-structure familiar problems in order to detect questionable or false assumptions, and thereby increase the probability of solution. One of the more straightforward heuristics for helping one to see a familiar problem in a new way is what synectics theory describes as "making the familiar strange."

To make the familiar strange is to distort, invert, or transpose the everyday ways of looking and responding. It is the conscious attempt to achieve a new look at the same old world, people, ideas, feelings and things. In the "familiar world" objects are always right-side-up; the child who bends and peers at the world from between his legs is experimenting with the familiar made strange.²

As we have suggested, the theory/practice problem is so utterly familiar that it has become the kind of stale issue that one is loathe to raise in educational company lest he be accused of rediscovering the obvious. How then might one make the problem less familiar and thereby gain a fresher perspective on it? We suggest that the reader try a simple expedient. Assume a childish posture, and look at the theory/practice problem "wrong-side-up," as it were. Instead of the familiar slogan, "education needs to translate theory into practice," consider its reciprocal. Transpose this everyday way of looking at the problem and for a moment entertain the converse proposition:

EDUCATION NEEDS TO TRANSLATE PRACTICE INTO THEORY.

Certainly this way of stating the problem is at least unfamiliar, if not strange. Moreover, we suspect that such a recommendation is apt to be regarded by many educators as intrinsically absurd. *Why* this recommendation is apt to be regarded as absurd or, at least, counter-intuitive, we believe depends upon some widely-shared assumptions about the nature of the problem. In particular, we will argue that the *prima facie* absurdity or felt perversity of the phrase, "translating practice into theory," is mediated by a number of questionable, if not false, presumptions about the relationship between theory and practice in education.

If one pays attention to the way in which educators (and others) use the terms "theory" and "practice," it is clear that the terms refer not only to *separate* enterprises but to *mutually exclusive* enterprises. That is, more often than not, theory and practice are construed as an antinomy rather than a simple dichotomy. We would suggest that this persistent tendency to regard theory and practice as an exclusive, either-or disjunction constitutes a considerable obstacle, if not an impasse, in the way of their reconciliation.

The origins of this supposed opposition between theory and practice can be traced in part to the penumbra of meanings that have been assigned to the terms "practice" and "practical" and to the systematic ambiguities that these meanings engender. For example, if educational practice is "practical," then educational theory must be (by semantic default) "nonpractical" or worse, "impractical." This conclusion, of course, trades upon a common, but *special*, meaning of "practical" that is synonymous with "sensible" or "wise." This invidious comparison between the theory and practice of education has, as Lieberman observes,

²W. J. J. Gordon, *Synectics: The Development of Creative Capacity* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 34 - 35.

resulted in an unfortunate tendency to glorify the "practical schoolmen." Too many individuals who fancy themselves "practical schoolmen" seem to believe there is something impractical about theoretical training.³

Another equally common, but again, *special*, meaning of "practice" or "practical" is synonymous with "action" or "related to action." For example, "practical" decisions are those decisions that require or demand an individual to act. (Note, however, that these "practical" decisions and their consequences may or may not be "practical," that is, "sensible" or "wise.") In this second sense, "practical" refers to the necessity of *actually* doing something. And again, in the binary logic of education, this meaning of "practical" tends to imply that "theoretical" must conversely denote "doing nothing."

Teacher education, as the initial agent of occupational socialization, seems to contribute to the view that educational theory and practice are essentially incompatible with one another. As teacher educators well know, it is very common to hear students preparing to be teachers to use the terms "theoretical" and "practical" in an evaluative way. With few exceptions, it is evident that for student teachers "theoretical" and "practical" function as pejorative and honorific adjectives, respectively. In a recent study⁴ based upon a content analysis of student teachers' free-response critiques of their teacher training, the terms "theoretical" and "practical" were omnipresent. Indeed, the terms were so over-worked that they served to refer to any number of descriptive contrasts: abstract vs. concrete, irrelevant vs. relevant, easy vs. difficult, doing vs. talking, ought vs. is, real vs. ideal, etc. Apart from the variety of loose, contextual meanings, however, what was particularly significant was the broad consensus among student teachers that "theory" and "practice" (whatever they might mean) were most certainly opposed or mutually exclusive.

Among these same student teachers, however, there was no clear agreement as to which components of teacher education were to be regarded as "theoretical" and which, "practical." As one might expect, the terms were used to distinguish the dualistic curriculum so commonplace in teacher education, that is, educational theory versus teaching methodology course. But the terms were also used comparatively (and used invidiously) to demarcate all academic coursework, including teaching methodology, from the practical or field component in teacher education. Even more inclusively, some students used "theory" and "practice" to contrast what they perceived as the profound discrepancy between the *idealistic* prescriptions of the whole of teacher education and the *realistic* exigencies of classroom life. The gap between theory and practice was perceived as a "credibility gap" between the sunny rhetoric of teacher education and the grim realities of classroom teaching. As Philip Jackson suggests:

The dissonance between what teachers say, or at least what their leaders say, and what they do takes many forms and has several important consequences. For some it lays the groundwork for the development of a cynical outlook toward the admonitions of idealists and the advocates of new and supposedly revolutionary practices. This cynicism, which grows out of a prior sense of disillusionment, strikes many young teachers as they begin to appreciate the unrealistic quality of several of the expectations aroused during the period of their professional training.⁵

³Myron Lieberman, *Education as a Profession* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1956), p. 196.

⁴J. T. Sanders, M. J. Andresino, L. M. Isaacs, and S. H. Irvine, "Teacher Education: Expectancies and Experiences". Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Professors of Education, Kingston, Ontario, May, 1973.

⁵Philip Jackson, "The Way Teachers Think," in G. Lesser (Ed), *Psychology and Educational Practice* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman, 1971), p. 16.

In reviewing these meanings of "theory" and "practice" derived from common usage, we wish only to underscore their two, recurring communalities. First, "theory" and "practice," whatever their contextual meanings, are often presumed to be diametric opposites and antithetical to one another. Insofar as "theory" and "practice" continue to be thought of as direct opposites, their reconciliation remains impossible, *in principle*. And the repeated entreaty to "translate theory into practice" is as futile as alchemy's efforts at transmutation.

Secondly, given the stridently pragmatic orientation of education, the connotative meanings carried by the terms "theory" and "theoretical" are frequently disparaging. And these connotations have the effect of placing a unilateral, even moral, obligation upon the "theoretical" to become "practical." They imply that the relationship between theory and practice must be unidirectional (as between cause and effect). To suggest that practice be translated into theory is akin to recommending that virtue become vice. Instead, educational theory is required to demonstrate that it is "sensible" or that it "actually does something" by transmuting itself into practice.

A somewhat more sophisticated interpretation of the function and obligation of educational theory is the notion that theory should somehow *reproduce* practice. This expectation trades upon a confusion between (1) a theoretical description or explanation and (2) what is being described or explained. Albert Einstein once remarked that it is not the function of theory to "give the taste of the soup."⁶ To be a description of the taste of the soup is clearly not to *be* the taste of the soup. This version of the reproductive fallacy consists in the belief that theory should convey to us the same, or something like the same sensations, reactions, responses — in a word, *experiences* — as would be conveyed by an actual confrontation with what is being described. Indicative of this common expectation, one finds Philip Jackson complaining that:

Teaching as actually experienced and as described in textbooks and college courses often turns out to be two quite different states of affairs.⁷

Similarly, a currently popular text in child development for teachers concludes in a critical vein that:

The portrait of the child painted by Freud or Piaget is restricted and static; it lacks the dynamism of the living, growing child.⁸

From our point of view, these comments, rather than complaints or criticisms, simply reiterate a necessary distinction. The implied failure of educational theory to "capture" (i.e., reproduce or be the psychological equivalent of) educational practice is perhaps too often nothing but a failure to distinguish theoretical descriptions from the phenomena referred to by those descriptions. Educational theory should not be expected to *reproduce* the discouragement of the slow learner, the dynamism of the whole child, or the buzzing, blooming confusion of

⁶Richard Rudner, *Philosophy of Social Sciences* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1966) p. 69.

⁷Jackson, *op cit.*, p. 16

⁸Guy R. Lefrancois, *Of Children: An Introduction to Child Development* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1973), p. 158.

the real classroom.⁹ Such expectations can only serve to maintain the prevailing pessimism about the relevance of educational theory to practice.

We have argued that the cognitive discomfort engendered by the counter-cliche, "translating practice into theory," is symptomatic of several questionable assumptions about both the nature of educational theory and its relationship to educational practice. The broad consequence of these assumptions has been to discourage any significant reciprocity or interaction between theory and practice in education. Myron Lieberman urged some time ago that:

It is essential that a clear understanding of the functional interdependence between theorist and practitioner replace the supposed opposition between them which is having such unfortunate consequences in education.¹⁰

It is doubtful, however, that this two-way interdependent view of the relationship between theory and practice is either generally accepted or taken seriously by educators. Where it is to be taken seriously, it would appear to imply a co-equal obligation on the part of practitioners to provide theoretical justifications for existing educational practices. We suspect, however that educational and, more specifically, school practices are often assumed to have their own unique, existential justification that obviates the need for any theoretical translation.

Elsewhere we have argued that the "translation of practice into theory" constitutes one of the necessary conditions that any occupation must fulfill if it is to be recognized as a profession.¹¹ If an occupation is to qualify as a profession, this entails that it possess a theoretical knowledge base that provides an intellectual justification for its practices. And to the extent that teachers and educators fail to justify their practices by direct appeals to such a theoretical knowledge base, then they fail to practice as *bona fide* professionals. Appeals to years of on-the-job experience do not after all distinguish professional occupations from apprentice trades. Thus even within the sociological context of educators' own professional aspirations, it is important that their practices be shown to be theoretically defensible, that is, "sensible" or "wise." This can only be accomplished by translating those practices into educational theory. To deny the possibility of doing so is tantamount to sawing off the professional limb upon which educators, themselves, sit.

Despite the linguistic focus of our analysis, we are less than sanguine that the reconciliation of educational theory and practice can be accomplished by merely tidying up some loose language and "breaking" a few problem-solving sets. It is likely that the theory/practice problem in education is not entirely a "problem" in the relatively simplistic sense of "a puzzle proposed for solution." The theory/practice dichotomy within education may simply be an abbreviated way of referring to a broad range of ideological and attitudinal conflicts that divide educators. We have chosen to emphasize (no doubt excessively) certain semantic

⁹An additional symptom of this reproductive view of explanation is the inordinate importance assigned to the teaching apprenticeship in teacher education. The unchallenged preeminence of teaching practice within teacher education is derived from the view that the *only* way to really understand teaching is to teach. No one, of course, would deny that some sort of knowledge or understanding of teaching is gained from the experience of teaching. But there is nothing whatever in such a concession that implies that this direct, experimental understanding of teaching is either the *only one* possible or a substitute for theoretical understanding.

¹⁰Lieberman, *op. cit.*, pp. 198 - 199.

¹¹J. E. McPeck and J. T. Sanders, "Some Reflections on Education as a Profession," *The Journal of Educational Thought*, Vol. 8, No. 2, August 1974, pp. 55 - 56.

ambiguities and conceptual confusions that serve to perpetuate the theory/practice dualism in education. These difficulties may not be the only reasons or even the most important reasons for the persistence of the problem. But as long as these ambiguities and confusions endure they will continue to structure and mask the problem in a way that renders it insoluble.

RESUME

L'ancien problème pédagogique, celui de "traduire la théorie en la pratique," n'a pas le sens conventionnel d'une question que l'on propose de résoudre. La considération de l'inverse, l'idée de "traduire la pratique en la théorie," sert à identifier certaines suppositions, largement répandues, au sujet de la nature et de la structure du problème, qui le rendent insoluble, *en principe*. En particulier, la perpétuation du problème dépend (1) de l'équivoque sémantique qui est le résultat de plusieurs significations idiosyncratiques des deux termes "théorie" et "pratique," et (2) de la confusion conceptuelle en ce qui concerne les rapports entre ces deux termes.