

## Where's the theory? Behind you! Oh no it isn't! Stanley Fish and the end of theory

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Gary Thomas

University of Birmingham

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I write this article at the beginning of the swine flu pandemic and in an attempt to be topical I shall draw a link. It seems to me that theory is like a virus. Like the virus, theory takes many forms, mutates regularly, is infectious, resilient and hard to pin down. And like the virus, it feeds off and damages its host.

The problem with theory is that the multitude of theory-forms and theory-talk allows expectations about certain kinds of theory and hopes about its power to infuse into all of those theory-forms, all of that theory-talk. And the hope about theory's power means that all of the false expectations infect every theory-form – every innocuous reflection, every conjecture, every use of literature – in such a way that the theory-saturated environment in educational research becomes distorted as it seeks to follow the contours of what it assumes to be good inquiry.

Stanley Fish (1989) is probably the most articulate critic of the foundationalist approach to personal theorizing and many of the ideas of this paper rest around his thinking. Before I proceed with the paper, though, I want to look at the way that theory and theorising are used by our community. Let's look at some commentary on theory and theorising by our RAE panel (HEFCE, 2009). I've gone through the comments using a search for mention of theory, theories, theoretical, theorising and theorisation, and I find that the panel is fond of theory. Here is the commentary, extracted together with relevant contextual material:

- *New perspectives on established fields were brought by theoretical resources such as postmodernist theory, socio-cultural and activity theory and psychotherapeutic theory.*
- *We would like to take this opportunity to say that as users we often need and value ideas and theories as much as data and evidence; sometimes it is a new and cogent way of conceptualising a problem, of discarding guiding assumptions, that is needed, at others it is an explanatory underpinning theory, at yet others it is the different perspective offered by combining disciplinary and/or methodological approaches. These can be as influential on policy as analyses of large/longitudinal datasets are assumed to be. (Occasionally it is research that on the surface is not at all 'applied' that offers a breakthrough.) There were examples of ground-breaking conceptual work, though in some of the outputs where claims were made for 'policy relevance' the research was untheorised and descriptive.*
- *There was original and high quality theoretical, scholarly and critical work in philosophy, sociology and history of education.*
- *The quality of the best government-sponsored and targeted research was excellent, both rigorous and effective in informing policy, with enough funding to sustain large multi disciplinary teams over many years. However other areas suffered in quality through being too closely tied to shifting government and government agency priorities, tight timescales, a focus on description rather than analysis, and limited theorisation. This loosened the links with social science and sometimes involved over-simplistic [sic] assumptions about teaching and learning.*

A stress on what I assume to be thinking and argument is to be welcomed. However, there is a lack of disentangling here which I worry about, for the term 'theory' is used, just in these extracts, to mean a variety of things. It means a well established schema (as, for example, in psychotherapeutic theory); it means a 'thinking tool' as in perhaps Bourdieu's use of the term or in Merton's middle range theory; it means Wright-Mills's 'grand theory' as in the explanatory underpinning theory; it means that which isn't immediately practical; it means that which is thought about and analysed.

The lack of problematisation or definition of theory is commonplace. Chambers finds nine meanings, including

- theory contrasted with fact
- theory as the opposite of practice
- practical theory or personal theory
- theory as presupposition from a set of orienting principles
- theory as a clearly developed argument

It doesn't end there though. Martindale (1979: 18), for example, says that theory is 'any coherent group of general propositions used as explanatory principles for a class of phenomena'. Cicourel (1979) makes a distinction between 'weak' theory, which he says lies behind the inductive assumptions of field research, and 'stronger' theory. Snizek (1979), after studying 1434 articles from nine major sociological journals, decided that there were four general categories of theory: realist, quasi-realist, quasi-nominalist, and nominalist. The realist was focused on the study of group properties and the discovery of structural laws and was 'relatively nonempirical' (ibid: 199). With 'quasi' orientations the 'theoretical perspectives were essentially social psychological in nature' (ibid: 198), while the nominalists had a 'psychological theoretical orientation' (ibid: 198).

While it is not at the core of the discussion I have noted, I would add generalisation as an important feature in assumptions about theory and theorization. From experiment to ethnography, it is generalizing and generalization that generally characterise theorisation. In experiment, the use of sampling and inferential statistics concern the degree to which general conclusions can be drawn from particular circumstances with the generalisation taken to be a theory which is inductively drawn from the data (Campbell, 1957). And in ethnography, Becker (1998: 3) talks of his tutor Everett C. Hughes, who suggested that 'theorizing' consisted of 'a collection of *generalizing tricks* he used to think about society' [emphasis added]. Althusser (1979, pp. 183-90) sees something similar in all scientific process: it all involves some generalizing and theorising from the knowledge generated in the course of ordinary activity to the level of scientific theory. In this regard, he distinguishes between different kinds of generality: I, II and III. For Althusser, generalizing proceeds from the raw material generality of I, worked on by the 'means of production' constructs of Generalities II to produce the working knowledge of Generalities III. Seen in this way, generalization is the inescapable ingredient of scientific process, but operates at differing levels in the crystallisation of ideas. Likewise, for Nadel (1957: 1-2) generalization is at the core of 'theorisation': he talks of theory consisting of interconnected generalizations existing in such a way that 'observable consequences logically follow'.

It is these diverse features of theory that I feel should be discussed and problematised. First, though, I wish to take on one aspect of the RAE panel's use of theory, in their talk of 'theoretical resources such as postmodernist theory'.

This notion of 'postmodernist theory' seems to me to be a particularly odd one, and it is for this reason that I intend to hinge the rest of this paper around the work of Stanley Fish. Fish is reputedly irritated at the assertion that he is a postmodernist (as indeed anyone who takes a radically critical view of epistemology should be) but I shall let this pass for the moment, since his position in the matters about which he writes – practice, usually in literary and legal studies, but in a range of other matters from baseball to house-painting – is wholly critical of any kind of foundationalist thinking, and in particular, theory.

### **Theory talk**

One of Fish's main subjects of criticism is theory, and its manifestation in what he calls 'theory talk':

Am I following or enacting a theory when I stop for a red light, or use my American Express card, or rise to speak at a conference? Are you now furiously theorizing as you sit reading what I have to say? And if you are persuaded by me to alter your understanding of what is and is not a theory, is your new definition of theory a new theory of theory? Clearly it is possible to answer yes to all these questions, but just as clearly that answer will render the notion "theory" *and* the issue of its consequences trivial by making "theory" the name for ordinary, contingent, unpredictable, everyday behavior.

Fish (1989: 327)

Fish (1989) suggests that much discourse about theory in the academy generally is not really about theory at all, but rather about 'theory-talk' – that is, 'any form of talk that has acquired cachet and prestige' (1989: 14-15). The cavalier way in which 'theory' is employed results in the word becoming powerless.

And this is often merely in the attempt to add epistemic weight and gloss to what is otherwise mundane. 'Theory' is used, says Fish ...

to designate high-order generalizations, or strong declarations of basic beliefs, or programmatic statements of political or economic agendas, or descriptions of underlying assumptions. Here my argument is that to include such activities under the rubric of theory is finally to make everything theory, and if one does that there is nothing of a *general* kind to be said about theory. (ibid: 378)

The recourse to generalisation that Fish notes here is ever-present in the attempt to legitimate theory. As Knapp and Michaels (1985a: 13) put it, theory (in their area of literary criticism) is 'the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general'. In this search for theory one finds, as in the project of some qualitative inquirers in education, the attempt to '... guarantee the ... validity of interpretations' (ibid). Fish (1989) extends this by saying that theory attempts to substitute '... for the parochial perspective of some local or partisan point of view the perspective of a general rationality to which the individual subordinates his contextually conditioned opinions and beliefs' (1989: 319). He suggests that theory in the form of external and independent guides not only will never really be found (it might putatively be found), but it is also unnecessary to seek it ...

... because you will always be guided by the rules or rules of thumb that are the content of any settled practice, by the assumed definitions, distinctions, criteria of evidence, measures of adequacy, and such, which not only define the practice but structure the understanding of the agent who thinks of himself as a 'competent member'.

In other words, practice, is a lot more complicated than theory ever could be. This is significant, for a major strand of reasoning has centred in the role of 'personal theory' in guiding practice. There are two grounds for mistrust in the line of reasoning that leads to notions of personal theory. The first lies in what are taken to be its unwarrantedly foundational roots. Thus one's practice in the classroom is justified by one's personal theory (refined after searching reflection, self-criticism, etc), which is taken to be more secure or reliable than the practice and context from which it was generated. But, as Carr (2006: 150) now puts it: '... our assumptions and beliefs cannot be made the object of our "practical theorizing" because they provide the indispensable precondition to our "practical theorizing".' It is impossible to separate the one from the other, a case Ryle (1949: 26) made some time ago when he said that 'intelligent practice is not a step-child of theory'.

Fish (1989: ix) says much the same thing in talking about his book's title '*Doing What Comes Naturally*'. He intends it 'to refer to the unreflective actions that follow from being embedded in a context of practice ... what you think to do will not be calculated in relation to a higher law or an overarching theory but will issue from you as naturally as breathing'.

In his essay *Dennis Martinez and the Uses of Theory* Fish (1989) takes as his opening vignette a TV interview with the famous baseball pitcher, Dennis Martinez. The baseball star is being asked by a reporter about the supposedly inspirational and facilitative dialogue between him and his coach. The reporter receives in response a two-stage narrative:

In the first stage he [Martinez, the baseball player] reports the event. "He [the coach] said, 'Throw strikes and keep 'em off the bases,' ... and I said, 'O.K.'" This is already brilliant enough, both as an account of what transpires between fully situated members of a community and as a wonderfully deadpan rebuke to the outsider who assumes the posture of an analyst. But Martinez is not content to leave the rebuke implicit, and in the second stage he drives the lesson home with a precision Wittgenstein might envy: "What else could I say? What else could he say?" Or, in other words, "What did you expect?" Clearly, what Berkow [the reporter] expected was some set of directions or an articulated method or formula or rule or piece of instruction ...

Fish (1989: 372)

The reporter had expected the personal theory articulated by the coach, assimilated in some way by Martinez and reflected on by him. But as Ryle would have predicted, the personal theory, if it were possible to articulate it, could never be of any use.

What they [Martinez and his coach] know is either inside of them or (at least on this day) beyond them; and if they know it, they did not come to know it by submitting to a formalization; neither can any formalization capture what they know in such a way as to make it available to those who haven't come to know it in the same way.

(ibid: 373)

As Fish goes on to make clear, there are two activities: playing baseball, and explaining (either to oneself or to others) playing baseball, and there is no relationship at all between these two activities. There are some baseball players who are better at discursing on their play than other baseball players, but this doesn't make them better baseball players. Similarly, there are some teachers who are better at

discoursing on their teaching than other teachers, but this doesn't make them better teachers – something I realised from being a parent governor in my daughters' secondary school: could the reflective, sensitive, articulate, confident, thoughtful superteacher I had witnessed talking to the governing body really be the same persistently late, disorganised, rude, unhelpful teacher that they described? (It was.) Fish explains: 'the practice of discoursing on practice does not stand in a relationship of superiority or governance to the practice that is its object' (ibid: 377). No one consults the formal model of the skill one is exercising in order to exercise it, or exercise it better. As Ryle (1949: 296) puts it, that model is merely a 'muttered rehearsal'. The conclusion that one is driven to about personal or practical theory is well outlined by Carr in his recent thinking on the subject (2006: 149):

What practitioners are committed to is not a theory but a set of beliefs and, in reflecting upon these beliefs, what they are making explicit is not their theoretical assumptions but that cluster of related beliefs which provide them with their interpretive understanding of their practice and the context within which their practice takes place. In 'articulating' their beliefs in this way, practitioners are neither engaging in 'theoretical activity' nor articulating their 'theoretical position'.

The second reason for mistrusting personal theory lies in the procedures that are made to accompany it. We should be concerned, Oakeshott says, to consider the role of 'procedures, methods and devices' and we should notice how in recent times these procedures and devices have broken loose from their subordination as a means of 'finding out' and have 'imposed themselves on our understanding of the transaction itself, with unfortunate consequences' (Oakeshott, 1989: 63). The problem with theory here – particularly theory as the word is used in education – is that it accretes these procedures and 'correct' methods. It pays too much heed to that which is established. This is a theme that has exercised literary scholars as well as those in the social sciences. Knapp and Michaels (1985a: 25) go so far as to suggest that the goal of theory in literary studies *is* the goal of method ... 'the governance of interpretive practice by some larger and more principled account'.

### **The corrosive effects of theory**

Looking both at student essays and academic articles in education, one of the dangers of structured reflection, as represented by theory in education, is in its conformity to the archive, its desire not to be original or radical but rather to cleave to the structure of established and respectable methods, literatures, rules and procedures. Once the formulae are followed, the structured reflection becomes as tedious as a model railway journey, forever chugging along the same route, forever passing the same dusty scenery. One can understand this conservatism on the part of students, since one of the commonest criticisms of the student dissertation is that the work is inadequately located in theory. Students, if they are wise, do as they are told by their supervisors. Even in their reflection, they understandably seek the right way.

There are implications for *practice* if we put too much faith in theory. Schön (1991: 42) has contrasted the 'high ground of theory' to 'the swampy lowland of practice', and one needs to be aware of the consequences of the contradistinctions deliberately drawn between theory and practice. Terry Eagleton's point is interesting here – namely, of identifying what the Other of something is if we want to know what it is about. The Other of theory is surely practice. Note that we don't talk about musing and practice, guessing and practice, hypothesizing and practice, saying 'Ah Ha!' and practice, or even thinking and practice – we talk about theory and practice. The simple existence of theory as a construct (irrespective of its validity) separates it from practice. And despite much talk about the integration of theory and practice, the *highlighting* of theory necessarily emphasises their disaggregation. The theory that is hankered after by many educators, I think, sets a fault line between theory and practice.

And once theory has been separated it is set on a pedestal. The distinction created between it and practice manufactures a relationship between the one and the other, and that relationship is one of priority and subservience. Theory is first; practice follows. This fracture is important for education, for theories of whatever kind – grand theory or personal theory – are taken to inform practice, and in this informing process some explanatory value is made to reside in 'theory'.

A critic of mine, Rajagopalan (1998), has asserted that almost anything we do involves theorizing. Even in the simple processes of selection and structuring, something above practice is occurring: theorizing is occurring. In looking in one's rear-view mirror on the motorway, for example, there is some mental transmutation taking place, Rajagopalan says, which involves both seeing and the assimilation into this process of already acquired knowledge of the world – 'theorizing' is the name given to what follows. We all do it, he asserts, and it is the defining characteristic of human beings. (I have to ask, as an aside, why just humans are theorizing when we do this kind of thing. Since dogs, chickens, frogs and sticklebacks all see, why aren't they and, for that matter, the entire animal kingdom with any visual apparatus, inside or outside a brain, also theorizing when they make judgments about how to move from here to there? But I'll leave that for a moment.) Whatever its problems, this invoking of theorizing seems benign enough. But incorporated into it is the unavoidable separation of theory from practice. Once invoked, theorizing sits

stubbornly there, pushing practice away and demoting it. Once theory is summoned, theory and practice forever remain separate, in a relation of priority and subservience.

For a profession like teaching this raises some profound questions concerning not only the contribution of theory to practice in education but also concerning the way we as teachers think about our own thinking and that of our pupils and students. The issue at stake is thus not simply the relatively trivial one of what we *call* this or that process, but what we conjure up when we rub the theory lamp.

The problem with theory in the way that it is used in education, and indeed all of the social sciences, is that it wants to evoke some explanatory process lying behind the phenomenon itself. Behind the driving mirror manoeuvre (an example given by Rajagopalan of theorisation) is ... what? A theory! Behind the teacher's skill lies what? A personal theory! Dennett (1993) uses the metaphor of the homunculus to describe the fallacy in this kind of analysis. He notes that what has happened over the years is merely a change in the 'grain size' (ibid: 262) of homunculi, so that new forms now replace the ghosts of yesteryear. The ones he identifies are the micronemes and censor agents of Artificial Intelligence. It seems to me that *theory* is the new homuncular metaphor for the social scientific academy.

All this is important for education, since teaching and learning are about intelligent performances and there is a common misconception that, as Ryle puts it, 'the execution of intelligent performances entails the additional execution of intellectual operations' (ibid: 49). This is the case whether or not one wants to bother about calling those intellectual operations 'theory.' When someone does or thinks something in the practical world, asking them to reflect or theorize on it produces merely Ryle's ghostly double, the 'soliloquized or muttered rehearsal' (ibid: 296). He asks: 'Why are people so strongly drawn to believe, in the face of their own daily experience, that the intelligent execution of an operation must embody two processes, one of doing and another of theorizing?' (ibid: 32).

So the problem as I see it is not simply with grand theories inhibiting our creativity as educators. The problem with personal theory is the invocation of theory as the other of practice: theory as the point around which explanatory ideas crystallize – personal 'theories' which supposedly help us to develop our practice. The problem, in the context of teacher development, is the belief that one's own observations and reflections can be rounded up, cleansed and transformed to provide an improved explanatory structure and practical guide for one's professional life. It is the idea that following the injection of suitable kinds of knowledge and training in reflective methods and theorizing, *experience* is elevated by some alchemy to 'personal theory' and that this furnishes us with some glittering epistemological sword.

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### **Do we really want more theory?**

To call all structured thinking 'theory' is unnecessary. More than this, it is misleading, for it leads us into assuming that the hollow theorizing of the kind Rorty (1998) despises is in some way the proper activity of scholars and professionals. Rorty (1998: 93-5) says that theory often offers 'the most abstract and barren explanations imaginable', that 'Disengagement from practice produces theoretical hallucinations,' and that '... in committing itself to what it calls 'theory,' [the academy] has gotten something which is entirely too much like religion'. But, more importantly for the educator, it also leads us into well-worn ruts about the assumption that an ability to engage in advanced personal theorizing should in some way be the hallmark of the successfully developing teacher. Practice is therein demoted to its opposite and other, as though practice were forever dependent on superior theoretical processes.

This, of course, is only to be thinking about 'theory' as it is employed as a construct – as it is sought by social scientists. But this theory, whatever its form, even if it is only Fish's (1989: 14) 'theory-talk', becomes separated out from practice and rises above it. The separation can only do harm since:

The distinction between theory and theory-talk is a distinction between a discourse that stands apart from all practices (and no such discourse exists) and a discourse that is itself a practice and is therefore consequential to the extent that it is influential or respected or widespread. It is a distinction between the claims often made for theory – that it stands in a relationship of governance or independence to practice – and the force that making those claims (which are uncashable) may have acquired as the result of conditions existing in an institution.

In a particular discipline, he says, theory-talk may well have consequences but these will be no different from, nor any more predictable than, the consequences of any form of talk that has acquired cachet and prestige.

The issue is not one just of vocabulary. Talking about theory is not, in other words, just talking about what we name thinking. In summoning theory lies the potential for artificially separating and ranking the intelligent performances demanded of all of us in education – children, students, teachers and

researchers – and subjugating those performances to some elusive, illusory explanatory phenomenon to which we give the name ‘theory.’

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